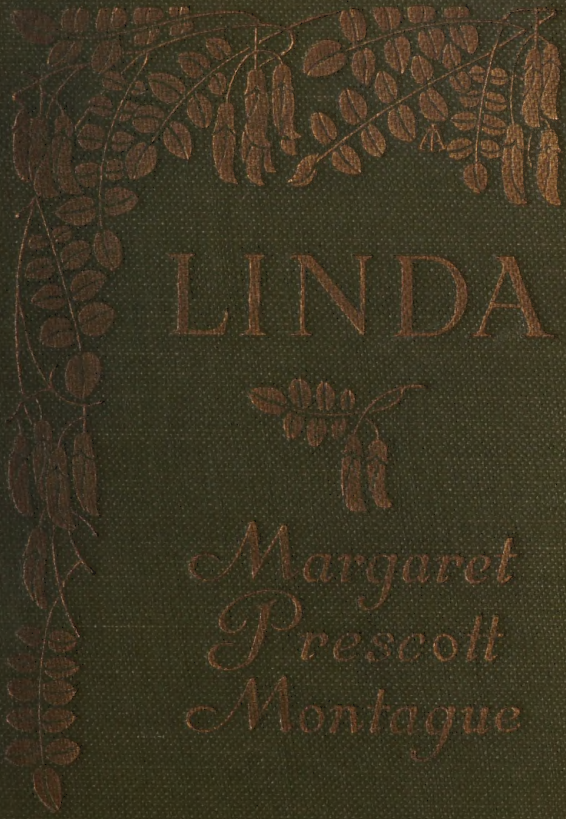

LINDA

Margaret Prescott Montague

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LINDA

THERE WAS AN AIR ABOUT HER OF MYSTERY

LINDA

BY

MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE

AUTHOR OF "THE SOWING OF ALDERSON CREE"
"IN CALVERT'S VALLEY," ETC.

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1912

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Published October 1912

TO

MRS. CHARLES PELHAM CURTIS

IN LOVING APPRECIATION OF HER

AFFECTIONATE INTEREST

LINDA

CHAPTER I

It was five o'clock in the afternoon. The shadows, from the steep mountains on either side of it, had almost engulfed Slemp's Hollow, and it lay black, and perfumed, and still in the clutch of late afternoon, and the promise of oncoming dusk.

The head of the hollow lost itself in the mountain's side, among a tangle of underbrush, but the foot of it, emerging from the woods, ran out between two cleared hillsides which formed a part of George Stillwater's little farm.

Suddenly on the brow of one of these hills a slip of a girl appeared. She stood there an instant, slender, and sharply outlined against the sky, then, with a quick little rush, like a bird swooping, she ran down the steep descent to the mouth of the ravine and there paused again.

She was slender and dark. One would have placed her age anywhere from fourteen to

seventeen. She glanced behind her, and around. There was no one in sight. Now that she had come down the hill, she was caught and secluded in the embrace of the hollow. In one hand hugged tight against her breast she carried a great book, in the other she held her checkered gingham sun-bonnet rolled into a crumpled bundle. There was an air about her of mystery, of adventure. Something unusual was afoot. Her movements were swift, but very delicate and silent. It was not as though she feared detection so much as that she appeared to be guarding her own excitement in a sort of still reverence. Her dark eyes shone, her lips, moist and eager, were parted a little breathlessly. After a moment she pushed aside the strong young arms of the hickory and red-oak brush that bordered the entrance to the ravine, and, stepping through their June foliage, came into more open woods where tall forest trees had choked out much of the underbrush. As the branches swung to behind her, it was as though green intangible doors closed upon the outside, everyday world, and opened to mystery and romance.

Her progress so far had been a series of pauses, and then rushes forward on silent, eager feet, and now again she stood still. The woods were rich and dark with hemlock lightened and made fairylike by feathery clumps of ferns among the boulders. Down the hollow, meandering indolently from side to side, as the fancy took it, flooded a little clear stream. On either side of it, the mountains came down very sheer and steep, and the banks of the stream were given over, here and there, to a wild riot of laurel and rhododendron growth. The former was in flower now, so that the stony pathway of the brook was all splashed with great patches of white bloom.

A moment the girl stood poised, alert and buoyant, holding herself tantalizingly in check, her feet almost on tiptoe upon the elastic cushion of moss, her extraordinary dark eyes deep with the poetry of the place, and her nostrils expanding delicately in answer to the wood's meandering perfumes; then, suddenly she dropped the reins of her self-control. Flinging her head back, she laughed, a low, rich bubble of intoxicated delight, and on the instant began

to run, lightly, swiftly, madly up the long slope of the rock-strewn way; her head held high, her eyes stars, and in her cheeks a splendid crimson. She leaped the scattered boulders, the fallen logs, and even occasionally the little stream itself, flinging herself eagerly, recklessly forward, a mad, breathless, flying little figure.

At last, near the head of the hollow, her breath failed her, and half bounding, half scrambling, she gained the top of a huge boulder, where innumerable mosses and ferns had found an abiding-place. Here she dropped down to rest, the great book still held tight in her arms.

"Oh!" she breathed, "*oh!*"

There were not words enough in all the English language, and certainly not in little Linda Stillwater's mountain vocabulary, to express her rapture and surprise.

After a moment's breathless pause, she looked down at the book and opened it tentatively, peeping in here and there, just nibbling its contents, as it were, and every now and again shutting it up tight, to catch it once more close to her breast.

And there was the whole extraordinary secret — Armstrong Decker had given Linda Stillwater a book filled with pictures of flowers — pictures of all the flowers of her West Virginian mountains, and of many more that she had never even heard of.

What was a miracle to Linda had happened so easily — in such a simple, everyday manner. Decker had been over at the County town of Wayside, the day before, and there in the window of a small bookshop he had seen this botany spread open to display its colored illustrations of flowers. He had meant to take Linda a bottle of perfume, perhaps, or a bit of cheap jewelry, as a present, but remembering suddenly her fondness for the woods and wild flowers, he decided upon the book instead.

He had entered the shop very conscious of his large, awkward person, — which was made, indeed, for mountains and woods and sawmills much more than for bookshops, — and inquired the price. The largeness of the amount surprised him into self-forgetfulness.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" he had cried. "All that for just one book?"

He hesitated a moment, but the vision of Linda's small, eager face glimpsed across his mind, and putting his hand in his pocket, he drew out his wallet.

"Well, it certainly is er heap of money," he said,"but I reckon when a hand wants a thing, he wants it, an' ef so be he's got the price on him, he's mighty apt to git it. Seein' as the Republican party keeps er prosperin' business, I've got the price, so you kin just wrap that there book up for me."

"Aire you a Republican?" he went on sociably, as he watched the clerk do up his purchase.

"No," the other returned, pulling the string from its holder, and snapping it off with a certain viciousness; "no, I'm Democrat."

"Well," Decker said, laying down a roll of soiled dollar bills, "I reckon you don't keer ef a little Republican prosperity bumps into you."

And so — as simply as that — Linda's miracle had happened.

When Decker presented her with the book, she had looked at it a moment uncomprehend-

ingly, and then — *then* it had fallen suddenly open upon a picture of purple asters.

"Why — why, them 's the farewell summers!" she had cried in a little gust of excitement.

She sat abruptly down upon the stone doorstep, her fingers fluttering over the pages, and as the leaves turned, face after face of her flower friends looked forth to greet her. "Indian turnips, wild potatoes, colt's foot," she whispered, as the jack-in-the-pulpits, spring beauties, and wild ginger flew past.

Decker looked down at her small, dark head, and at the sweep of warm, excited color that had flushed into her cheeks.

"You seem to be sorter tickled," he said in his soft, deep drawl.

She raised her face to him, and suddenly, ridiculously, her shy eyes misted over with tears.

"I just never knowed there *was* such books in all the world!" she breathed with a little soft gasp.

And that was true, on the top of Freedom Ridge, where she lived, they were not very used to books.

"I certainly am erbliged to you, Mr. Decker," she added.

The shy words were constrained and inadequate enough, but her eager eyes were stars of gratitude before which Decker's own gaze dropped.

"Well, you certainly are welcome," he said awkwardly.

All through the busy day of house- and outdoor work, Linda had hugged close the thought of her wonderful book, letting her fancy just touch it, and then flee away from it again, as from something too good to be true, and now at last the opportunity had offered, and she had slipped away from her sordid, everyday world, to enter this other life of the woods, the flowers, and her own dreams.

Resting now after her mad flight up the hollow, the book lying in her lap, she stared off into the woods, her imagination feeling its way along new, unguessed paths. It was not so much what the book actually was, as the doors that it opened into a new and wider life. If there were such books about flowers, why, then, of course there must be books also about trees,

and birds, and all the hundreds of other things she loved and longed to know about — things about which her teachers at the log school-house at the foot of the ridge had never seemed to be able to give her much information.

She lived upon the top of Freedom Ridge, and to the north, south, east, and west, were mountains — more and more of them, stretching away as far as the eye could see. Though she was familiar enough with sawmills, — and hated them bitterly for the havoc they wrought among her friends the trees, — she had never seen a train until she was ten years old, when for the first time her father had taken her to Linden, the village post-office, nine miles away, and the terror and emotion of the sight had almost reduced her to tears. In all her sixteen years, she had only been once to the county town of Wayside, and only six times all told even to Linden. There had been nothing, therefore, in her sequestered life to prepare her for the revelation that this book had brought.

At length, with a little sigh of sheer content and wonderment, she descended from her rocky perch, and laid the botany down upon the wood

mould, open at an illustration of the mountain laurel.

"Just so 's you all kin see what you look like, sure 'nough," she told the overhanging cluster of white bloom that peeped down at itself.

Then, sitting down, she slipped off her shoes and stockings, setting her sturdy little feet free, and, gathering up her skirts, plunged ankle deep, and almost knee deep, into the brown, still pools of the stream. Safe in the seclusion of the woods, she became once more a little mad thing. She laughed, she sang little snatches of song, — hymns, they were, for the most part; — she chattered defiance to a brown thrush that scolded her too near approach to its nest; she jeered at the terrified crawfishes, who, with tails tucked under them, scurried away backward from her bare feet; she found a service bush, and feasted riotously upon its red berries; and then she went off into another wild frolic, pirouetting and dancing upon the green cushions of moss, that gave a delicious spring and tickle to her bare feet. Every now and then, her rapture fitted itself to lines of song — how or why, she did not know, but she sang the words

out in the stillness of the woods as she danced to their rhythm.

"I am myself, and the world is mine —
Laughter and love and June sunshine,"

she sang. A bird called from somewhere in the near-by woods, and Linda answered with

"Singing birds in the tops of the trees —
Laughter and love and summer breeze."

It was all an ecstasy of life, of emotion, and delight in the realization of her own individuality — in her youth and freedom.

But at last the afternoon began to fade softly, and with it, the fires of her excitement burned down a little. She came back almost on tiptoe to her shoes and stockings, her sunbonnet, and her treasured book. A sudden whip-poor-will shattered the dusky stillness with its breathless note. And as Linda made her way down the hollow, every stone dislodged by her feet crashed startlingly up and down the mountains. The woods were sinister now and lonesome, with a hint of terror, but they had been the scene of her transfiguration, and before she left them, she paused a moment and looked

back. She was deliciously tired from her excitement, and from her mad dance, and a happy stillness had fallen upon her. Instinctively she put out one hand and clasped the stem of a young maple sapling in an eager companionship of existence. A smile flitted across her face as she looked up through the tree's delicate foliage to the soft sky above.

"O Lord!" she breathed in a little gust of emotion; "oh! ain't it *good* to be alive!"

Then she turned quickly, and pushing aside the undergrowth, emerged into the open, the cloak of her everyday reserve descending upon her.

CHAPTER II

LINDA'S homeward way led, first, up the cleared side of the hill which bordered the ravine, and as she gained its crest the whole of her father's little farm lay spread before her. She stood still a moment looking down upon it, almost like a traveler returned from some foreign country. There was still daylight enough to see the small fields and meadows cut across by rail fences; the dilapidated stable, and the rather large log house, with its apple trees, its corncrib, its well, and chicken coop. A little thread of new moon hung in the sky, almost lost among the waning sunset clouds. George Stillwater's farm was upon the top of Freedom Ridge, the highest peak of the Deer Lick range of mountains. There were no other mountains to overtop it, and as Linda stood there, there was nothing save the immense hollow sweep of the soft evening sky above her. Below lay the little farm, and overhead was the sky. It was so still that every sound came sharply up to her. She could

see and hear all the activities of the home life below: the clanking of the harness upon the plow horses as her father brought them in — he had been working his corn late that afternoon; —her little sisters' shrill voices as they called "Chick—*ee!* Chick—ee!" and even the flutter of the chickens as they came, half running, half flying, a wave of outspread wings; and farther away she heard her mother's voice calling Pet and Dolly, the cows. There was something lonesome and weird in that cry of "Whoo-o-k! Whook-*ee*!" across the dusk and falling dews of the evening, and Linda's heart smote her. The milking was her duty, and as she stood there listening, and saw the thin curl of smoke go up from the kitchen chimney, she knew that her frail mother had had both the supper and the cows to see to because she had chosen to run away to the woods. Yet she still stood motionless. She was as detached as a spectator looking on at a play. There was the whole scene of her own home life spread before her, the life to which she belonged, and yet, with the glamour of the woods still upon her, did not belong. Presently she would go down the zigzag path, cross

the rail fence, and entering the kitchen, take up her evening duties, and be again just Linda Stillwater, George Stillwater's oldest girl. But for this still moment, standing there on the hillside with the cool evening air upon her cheeks, and blowing against her bare throat, and with the wide sky over head, she was another person; she had stepped out of the picture of her familiar life and viewed it with a curious detached gaze.

Suddenly there came the sharp wail of a baby from the cabin and instantly Linda changed to her alert, everyday self. Clutching her book tight, she sped quickly down the uneven path in response, for that was the cry of Benny her baby brother, and all his sisters were his devoted slaves. Quick as she was, however, one of the little girls at the chicken coop had already scudded into the house, and by the time Linda reached the yard fence, the baby had ceased crying.

Leaning across the fence in the dusk was a man. It was Armstrong Decker. Linda had a sudden surprised realization that he was waiting for her, yet her mind was so taken up with

gratitude for the gift of her book that she went straight up to him, and resting her hands upon the fence raised her rapt child's face to him.

"Oh, Mr. Decker," she cried, "this is just the prettiest book I ever did see!"

She was so simple, so young and appealing, and withal so lovely, and unlike anything that Decker's rough life had ever known, that he was confused. For a moment he lost himself and what he had meant to say in the wonder of her personality.

"I'm mighty glad you was pleased," he said, awkwardly, at length. Then he laughed: "Was you up in the woods with it?" he asked.

A little smile dimpled about Linda's lips. In spite of his roughness and constrained shyness, and of his being nearly thirty years her senior, she had always a sense of being in touch with his sympathy.

"I took it up there," she answered, "just to show some of the flowers what they looked like sho' 'nough. I thought they'd like to see pictures of theirselves."

"An' was they pleased?"

"They seemed to be right much tickled."

She smiled at him a moment and then with quick easy grace climbed to the top of the fence.

"I got to go in an' help Mammy git supper," she said, and was just about to leap down, when Decker suddenly reached up and gathering her in his big arms held her tight against his breast for one passionate, inarticulate moment before he set her upon her feet again.

Linda was wildly startled and angry. She struggled to free herself, but though his arms were no longer about her, he still gripped her hands so that she could not go.

"Lindy!" he cried hoarsely; "Lindy, I —" He stopped uncertainly, his emotion too big for his words.

For a moment they faced each other in silence, the dusk engulfing them. All of Linda's excitement had fallen suddenly to a frozen terror. In the woods the whip-poor-will was still calling and at the stable she could hear her father cursing his horses, but there in the tense dusk, she and Decker seemed to be the only living things in the universe.

"Lindy," Decker said at last with a sort of gasp; "Lindy — will you marry me?"

The whole world spun round with Linda.

"Marry *you?*" she gasped in utter astonishment, hardly above her breath.

"I know I'm er rough sort of er hand," he rushed on, "an' yer just er little white spring flower, but I think er heap of you, Lindy, an' —an' I'd be mighty good to you, honey," he said huskily.

Linda stood still one astounded moment longer, then she wrenched her hands free.

"Marry you!" she cried. "Er course, er *course* I won't marry you! Yer old enough to be my father. I ain't goin' to marry nobody yit; — why, I ain't but sixteen!"

She turned to run swiftly past him, but he placed himself in her way.

"I know I'm er whole heap old 'n you," he said humbly, "an' I'm er mighty rough hand, but — before God, Lindy, I'd be mighty good to you."

"Er course I won't marry you — er course — er *course*, I won't!" Linda cried passionately; and flinging his hands violently aside, she fled past him to the house.

CHAPTER III

Linda ran swiftly along the path and entered the dimly lighted kitchen. All her being was on fire with excitement and revulsion of feeling, but outwardly, save for the angry flash of her eyes and the vivid color of her cheeks, she was calm and constrained. She flung her book and sunbonnet down on a chair, and went over to the stove where her mother was frying the bacon for supper, and taking imperiously out of her hand the fork with which the other was turning the slices in the pan, said, "I'll tend ter this, you go an' set down fer er spell."

Her mother yielded her place without protest, but she stole a questioning glance at Linda before she turned away and began setting the things upon the supper table.

Everything was late that night. George Stillwater had chosen to stay out working his corn with his oldest boy until almost dusk, and Mrs. Stillwater had been retarded in her work by Linda's absence, so that it was dark now, though

as a rule in the summer time the family supped by daylight.

The one hand-lamp illumined the kitchen but dimly, everything was in confusion, and the choking smoke from some burnt fat got into Linda's eyes and throat. It was very hot by the stove, and infinitely different from the cool peace and mystery of the woods. The baby set up a fresh wail from his cradle, and Mrs. Stillwater, picking him up, held him on her meagre hip, and jolted him up and down, as she went about the kitchen.

"You're mighty late, Lindy. Where you been?" she asked, in a tired voice. She was a frail little woman with a pale, strained face, almost as childlike as Linda's, but while Linda's was the face of a fearless child, hers was that of a frightened one.

"I been up in the woods," Linda answered.

"I had to do the milkin' and see ter everything, 'cept what Lily and Lidy helped me do."

There was no complaint and no whining in the tone, just an infinite resigned weariness.

In all her tumult of feeling Linda was conscious of a stab of remorse.

"Oh, I ought n't ter er run off like that! I certainly am sorry!" she cried quickly.

Here Lily and Lidy, the two youngest girls, burst into the room. George Stillwater had had a grotesque fancy for having all his girls' names begin with "L." Lidy, the youngest girl, held a dozen or so eggs gathered up in her brown checked apron. Lily carried the tin wash-basin that had contained the chicken feed. This she flung clatteringly down behind the stove.

"Mammy!" she cried, "Lidy and me could n't find that ole brownie hen nowheres, an' I jest bet some varmint's done took her! Where you been all this time, Lindy?" she demanded, whirling upon her sister.

Lily was a vigorous, overgrown girl of fourteen. Her face was covered with a mass of brown freckles, from among which her black eyes flashed boldly. She looked like her father, and had none of her mother's delicacy of feature nor Linda's unusual beauty. The little girl, Lidy, had a wizened, colorless little face that spoke of disease. Between her and Lily came their brother Edgar; then there was a long gap where two children had died of "the sore

throat" before the advent of the present baby.

"Where you been?" Lily demanded afresh, as her sister did not answer at once.

"Up in the woods," Linda said, as she dished up the bacon.

"Well, it's er pretty way fer you to act — runnin' off like that an' leavin' all the work fer mammy an' me ter do! I'm goin' ter tell pappy on ye — you just see ef I don't," the other threatened.

Linda made no reply. She was used enough to Lily's domineering manner, and it rarely disturbed her serenity. She had a curious detached manner of owning herself, which usually shut her safely away from her jarring home surroundings.

The little sister Lidy stole over and picked up Linda's botany.

"Don't tech sister's book, honey; you might git it dirty," her mother admonished her.

"Oh, she kin look at it ef she wants," Linda said tolerantly.

Lily began to sing suddenly in a strident, malicious voice, —

"Old man Decker, he ain't so gray,
But he'll git him er wife,
I reckon, some day —
Linda! Linda!
What's ter hinder!"

— punctuating the song with boisterous shouts of laughter, at her own wit.

" You hush up, Lily; — hush right up now!" her mother cried sharply, always on the quick defense where Linda was concerned. Linda herself said nothing, but her cheeks grew an angrier, deeper pink. So all along Lily had suspected what she had not so much as dreamed herself? She drew the biscuits from the oven, and set the coffee upon the table.

" There! supper 's ready — holler to Pappy an' Ed, Lily," she said.

"Holler to 'em yerself," Lily retorted. "I ain't yer nigger, and, anyhow, I been runnin' round all the evenin' doin' your work."

"I'll go, Lindy!" Lidy cried devotedly, and, springing to her feet, she sped out of doors, and in a moment they heard her shrill little pipe calling — "Aw, pappy! Ed! You all come on an' eat now!"

Supper that evening was eaten in silence, Linda and her mother waited on the rest, replenishing coffee-cups and handing biscuits, and not sitting down themselves until the first edge of the others' appetite was satisfied.

As Linda dropped at last to her chair, Lily began, "Pappy — what you reckon Lindy done this evenin' — she run off ter ther woods an' lef' all her work fer mammy an' me to 'tend to."

She pushed through to the end of her accusation, in spite of her mother's sharp attempt to quiet her.

George Stillwater looked at Linda from under lowering brows. His eyes were small and deep-set and cruel, but to Linda's surprise he did not appear to notice Lily's charge.

"What did you say ter Armstrong Decker?" he demanded. "I seen you an' him talkin' up by ther fence."

Linda's eyes flew open and her cheeks went a wild crimson. Yet there was just a chance that he did not know what she and Mr. Decker had been talking about, so she answered simply: —

"I tole him I was mightily erbliged ter him fer ther book he give me."

But her father brought his hand down with a bang that jarred all the dishes.

"Don't you go tryin' none of yer tricks on me, gal!" he cried, leaning fiercely across the table. "You know damned well that ain't what I mean! Armstrong Decker tole me he 'lowed ter marry you, an' I want ter know what answer you give him."

"Oh, Pappy!" Mrs. Stillwater cried in distress, moving up half fearfully behind Linda.

Lily laughed with malicious excitement, but Lidy's mouth dropped open in fear. The boy had gone out to attend to some last chores at the stable.

Linda's great eyes stared at her father out of her vividly white face. She was surprised and angry and ashamed, but not frightened.

"Answer me!" he roared, bringing his fist down again upon the table.

Lidy began to cry.

"I tole him that er course I would n't marry him," Linda returned quietly.

"Then, you'll tell him something different by this time termorrer evenin', er I'll know ther reason why!" the man cried. "Ef you think

I'm er goin' on slavin' mornin' an' night workin' ter feed you when er good man's offerin' yer a home, yer mightily mistaken — an' you runnin' off ter the woods every chanct you git."

"Oh, pappy!" Mrs. Stillwater cut in, mustering a frightened, desperate bravery. "Lindy don't hardly know ther man; — we all don't none of us really know nothin' erbout him, nor where he come from."

He wheeled upon her. "You shut yer mouth an' keep out," he commanded. "I reckon I know how to 'tend to this, an' I reckon I know er good man when I see him. Armstrong Decker is er good man, an' makes good money at ther mill. Why he's ther master sawyer there, an' anybody kin tell yer that's *good* pay."

Mrs. Stillwater sank into a chair and began to weep in the same frightened, helpless way as Lidy. But Linda stood up straight and defiant before her father.

"You hear what I say?" he demanded.

"Yes, I hear," she returned.

"Well, aire ye goin' ter do what I tell ye?"

"No," she said, in a low voice, and started to leave the kitchen.

"You won't, won't you?"

The man rose slowly, threateningly, from the table and faced her.

"No, I won't," she said, meeting his eyes steadily.

"Then, maybe that'll knock some sense inter you"; and with his great open hand he gave her a stinging slap full upon her delicate, proud little face.

Linda staggered back for one astounded moment, then, with a half-choked cry, she sprang upon him like a furious little wild animal.

With an oath of astonishment her father flung her violently off and down upon the floor. Her head struck against the table, as she fell, and she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER IV

When Linda came to herself, her first impression was of the smoke-stained rafters of the kitchen. She wondered vaguely why she should be looking at the ceiling; then, after a moment, she heard some one crying beside her, and felt her face wet with cold water, and began to realize that she was lying on the floor and that her mother was sobbing sharply as she bathed her face. Everything was far away and unreal. There was something unpleasant and soft in the water, and after what seemed a long time of difficult struggling thought she perceived that her mother had poured the water into the tin wash-basin, regardless of the fact that some of the chicken feed still adhered to it. Linda made a faint gesture to push the basin away.

"Aire you all right, honey!" her mother cried. "Aire you all right?"

Linda could not remember what had happened and was powerless to think and reason it out, but without thought or reason she re-

sponded at once to that note of acute terror in her mother's voice.

"Yes — yes, I'm all right," she said faintly, instinctively endeavoring as always to reassure the other.

She put her hand out gropingly and dragged herself to a sitting posture, leaning against her mother's shoulder.

"Er course she's all right; what'd I tell yer?" she heard her father say blusteringly. "But she won't be all right if she jumps on me like that ergin."

But Linda knew, told by something deeper than thought, that in spite of his bluster something had frightened her father, too. Things were all in a confused dream, but his voice aroused in her a sense of anger, why she did not know.

"What's happened?" she questioned feebly.

Nobody answered her, and it seemed too great an effort to ask again.

"I reckon I'll go to bed," she said at last, struggling to her feet. Leaning on her mother, and feeling very faint and sick, she tottered into the little room which she shared with Lily and

Lidy. There her mother helped her into bed, crying weakly all the time. Linda said nothing. All she desired was utter stillness. To lay her wildly aching head absolutely still against the pillow and to try to forget the nausea.

"Jest take ther light out an' let me be," she whispered. And at length she was left alone in the comforting dark. Her head was a throb of pain, and waves of giddiness swept over her.

A little later on, Lily and Lidy stole in, and asked her persistent, wearisome questions as to how she felt, as they both undressed for bed.

When the light was out at last, Lily suddenly whispered through the dark, "Lindy?"

And after a long time Linda summoned strength enough to say, "What?"

"You better watch out — pappy, he's jist awful mad."

Linda did not reply, but she lay trying to understand why Lily's usually aggressive voice should hold that hint of fear in it.

After another long period, Lily whispered again, "You better watch out, Lindy!" Linda did not feel that she could answer, and after a time she fell asleep.

She woke again late in the night, still with the same difficult sense of confusion upon her, and lay looking at the glimmer of light at her window which showed the dark outline of a mountain ridge against the sky; listening to all the gentle sounds of the summer night, and trying to make out what had happened. Her confused memory crept back searching for something to take hold of. She remembered that she had been very happy about something — oh, it was over her book! Again she felt the still happy seclusion of the woods surrounding her. Then? Oh, yes! She had come back from the woods and a man had been leaning against the fence awaiting her, in the dusk. It was Armstrong Decker — Suddenly her mind cleared, as a flash of light clears the dark, and in an instant she remembered. Her father had slapped her in the face because she would not marry Mr. Decker. She was too languid to feel any sharp anger, but as she remembered her face was pricked all over with a tingling shame. She lay quite still, not thinking at all, but acutely aware of the blow upon her face. At last she saw the faint gray dawn begin, and the slow creeping of the light

across the window gradually hypnotized her into sleep.

She woke to find Lily standing by her bed with a cup of coffee.

"Pappy's jist es mad es he kin be," Lily volunteered. "He jist talks awful — I'd be jist awful skeered if I was you, Lindy."

"I ain't skeered," Linda returned dreamily.

"Mammy said," Lily pursued, "that she did n't reckon you had ter marry any feller if you did n't want to, an' he jist flew mad d'reckly and cussed her an' everybody, an' said they was too many of us to feed fer you to go puttin' on airs, an' if she did n't help make you marry old man Decker he'd make her mighty sorry. An', Lindy, I'm feered he'll jist do something awful to you an' mammy both if you don't do like he says."

Linda turned her head away from the confusing light and gave no answer. Again she slept and did not wake until late in the afternoon. She felt at last refreshed and like herself. The vigor of her strength and youth was asserting itself, and all her languid indifference was being swept away. She sat up, and was conscious of

her mother standing opposite her, and staring at her in silence. Linda felt suddenly an overwhelming rush of protective pity toward this little frightened woman. She smiled reassuringly.

"Mammy, honey," she said, "I'm mighty hungry, I wished you'd git me somethin' ter eat."

A look of relief came into her mother's face.

"I'll see what I kin git," she said, and disappeared. She came back presently bearing a plate containing some hastily collected food. It was pathetically unappetizing, and again Linda was touched almost to tears by her mother's frailty and inadequacy.

"I'm mighty sorry I run off yesterday an' left you all ther work to do," she said.

Her mother's face quivered suddenly all over like a child's, and, turning her head to one side, she took up a corner of her apron and covered her eyes.

"Oh, *that* don't matter, Lindy, honey," she said brokenly.

Presently she took the apron down and stared at Linda with a face of dumb misery.

"What aire you goin' ter do, Lindy?" she half whispered.

Linda did not answer at once, and her mother went on.

"Seems like I ought ter be able ter help you," she faltered, "but some way I jist don't know *what* ter tell you ter do. I b'lieve Mr. Decker is er good man an' would act all right by you — but, oh, Lindy! I don't want you ter have ter marry yit. You ain't nothin' but er chile — and I was married that away — when I were n't but fourteen, — and I never knowed what I was up ergainst."

There was silence between them a moment. Then Linda spoke.

"Lily was skeered. She said pappy talked jist awful to you — aire you skeered of him?"

Her mother twisted her hands together in her apron and looked away: —

"Yes, I'm skeered," she admitted at length. Her eyes stared out of the window as though she saw in review all the years of her married life. "I been skeered of him always," she said. "I was skeered of him 'fore ever I married him

— maybe that was one reason why I sorter took to him — 'cause I was skeered of him — an' — an' I was n't nothin' but er chile noway."

Linda looked at her wonderingly. She had been used all her life to her father's temper and harsh treatment of herself and the other children, and dimly she realized that he might be brutal to her mother as well, but, fortified by her dreams and her buoyant youth, she had never guessed that the little woman who was her mother had been leading all this time a life of abiding fear.

"Yer see," her mother stumbled on, "it's ther licker makes him so bad. You know he allers was that away when he was drinkin', an' since ther sawmill moved in here, he gits licker from ther hands there er heap oftener than he uster."

"Er course," Linda said, "I oughter er noticed, but some way, I jist thought he was mo' quarrelsome 'an usual."

"What will he do ter you?" she questioned. "O, mammy, what will he do?"

Her mother still twisted her thin hands tight together in her apron.

"I dunno what he'll do," she said. "But —" she put one hand out and laid it on Linda's wrist with a sudden, unexpected strength and firmness. "But that don't matter, Lindy," she said. "What he 'll do ter me ain't ter make you marry any feller you don't want ter."

"But you're skeered," Linda persisted.

For a moment the other tried to evade the look, then she put her hands up to her face and wept.

"Yes," she admitted, "I'm skeered — I'd like ter make out like I ain't, but some way with you, I jist can't git erway from ther truth; — but that don't matter, Lindy, — I been 'fraid always, — ever since I married him, — an' I reckon I kin go on standin' it." She spoke with a kind of desperate, broken courage. "You ain't ter bother erbout me, honey, I'll be more skeered ter have you marry er man you did n't want to an' you jist a chile like I was."

Linda stirred restlessly. "I got ter think —" she said, putting her hand up vaguely to her head. "It's hot in here; I reckon I'll git up er while. Where's he at?"

"Him an' Ed is workin' ther corn over in ther far field."

"I'll git out in the woods an' study erbout it fer er spell," Linda said. "Seems like I kin allers think better out er doors."

CHAPTER V

At the door of the cabin, Linda paused for a moment, her hand resting against the door-frame, and her eyes looking far across the mellow landscape of steep little brown and green fields spread there before her. A honeysuckle vine was trained over the little stoop which the house boasted, and as she stood there its green tendrils waved above her head, and every breath she drew was sweet with its perfume. The vigor of the evening was beginning to creep into the air, and with her returning strength she felt a sudden lightness and fearlessness, and ability to face not only her father, but anything that life might bring. Away across the fields she could see him following his plow between the green ripples of the corn rows. She raised her head with a little proud gesture, and a light came into her eyes. She would have liked to run suddenly and swiftly down the slope of the hill across the shining meadow and brown field and, stopping him imperiously in the midst of

his work, tell him that she would not be made to do anything she did not wish to. But even as she half turned to obey this impulse, the wistful, frightened face of her mother came before her, and with a little fierce, impotent gesture she turned instead and went toward the sheltering woods. But her anger and her sense of youthful strength made her walk with a proud, beautiful erectness.

She came at last to the little secluded hollow where the day before she had shown the flowers her book in such a transport of delight. Yesterday she had danced along the edges of the brook. To-day she trod softly in and out through the shade, shrinking instinctively from any sound that her feet made upon the stones. Then she had been a transfigured child dreaming, of she scarcely knew what wild and imaginary things. Now she was still a child, it is true, but an older, soberer one, faced by reality. She made her way up the hollow to the great boulder where she had sat the evening before, tired from her mad, ecstatic race, and here she seated herself again and stared thoughtfully away into the woods. She felt very calm and caught up

in a great stillness. She was possessed, in spite of her youth, of a strong inner self, which in the face of any emergency rose always and took command of her personality.

She looked at the situation with calm, clear eyes, and wondered what she should do. One thing only seemed certain to her. She could not remain under the same roof with her father. Perhaps if she had not had those mad, transfigured hours of the day before, when she had felt the pull of her own individuality, and seemed to see the world opening before her, she could have stood that blow upon her face better. But, coming when it did, it was not to be borne. She trembled a little now as she remembered it and felt again that same wild leap of anger. Sitting upon the boulder she drew her knees up to her chin and, clasping her arms around them, stared away into the woods, a sombre, lonely, little figure. She could never again live in the same house with her father. There was the certain fact. She felt it deep and sure in the foundations of her being. This being so, only two courses were open to her. She must either marry Armstrong Decker, or else she must set out in the

world for herself. With her utter fearlessness and childlike self-confidence, she inclined to the latter course. But where should she go — and could she manage to escape her father? And if she did, what would he do to her mother? That was the sharp question which was always presenting itself.

Suddenly there was the sound of a dislodged stone along the water's edge, and looking up, Linda saw Armstrong Decker coming up the hollow toward her. She sat very still and watched his approach. He came rapidly, stumbling over the stones in his haste, and she could see that his face was flushed with anger. Without a pause he came straight up to her and laid his hand almost roughly on her shoulder.

"What they been doin' to you, poor little honey?" he cried, his voice muffled with passion.

Linda drew away, and slipping from her perch, placed the huge boulder between them.

"Don't," she breathed.

He stood where he was, not attempting to come nearer, but his hands resting on the green moss of the stone were clinched so hard that they showed white at the knuckles.

"Lidy come over to the mill an' tole me this evenin'," he said. "She said yer paw treated you bad last night when you tole him you was n't goin' ter marry me."

Linda nodded her head. "Yes." A slow, deep color rose in her cheeks. "He slapped my face," she said.

The man caught his breath. "God damn him!" he cried.

"I don't recollect just what happened then," she went on after a moment, "but I think I jumped on him, an' he knocked me down so's I did n't know nothin' fer a spell."

Decker made a furious, inarticulate sound.

"Lindy," he burst out, — "Lindy, ef you'll jist marry me, nobody shan't ever tech you ergin! I ain't much — I know I'm er rough hand — but I'll see to it that nobody don't ever lay er finger on you ergin."

He paused, and Linda stood looking at him. They faced each other across the great rock clothed in its mosses and delicate wild ferns. The cool smell of the woods met their nostrils, and the sounds were the faint free swish of the summer wind through the trees, and the gurgle

of the brook. A little flicker of sunlight darted back and forth between them as the wind tossed the leaves of the tree through which it shone. It ran across the stone and almost up to the man's face, and then fled down again to race up Linda's body to her hair. The girl's delicate oval face was lifted to scrutinize the man opposite. Her eyes, earnest and fearless, looked clearly at him, unveiled by any self-consciousness. Her dark hair swept back in straight, heavy masses from her forehead, and her lips were faintly parted in the earnest question of her gaze.

Suddenly Decker put up his hand, and sweeping the soft black hat from his head, stood with a sort of still reverence bareheaded and waiting under her gaze.

He was a man of about fifty. His hair was gray upon his temples, and his face was deep-lined and weather-beaten, but he was still strong, powerful, and rugged with the strength of out of doors. His face was kind, and he seemed a man one might turn to in time of trouble. Suddenly as Linda looked at him, her question in her eyes, her buoyant defiance failed her. She

was conscious of being very young and very defenseless in the grip of fate. To her own surprise she felt her eyes filling slowly with tears. She lowered her lids, and stared down through the shimmer of moisture at her little brown hands picking at the moss of the stone. The tears brimmed over, and began to trail slowly down her cheeks. She took up a corner of her apron and wiped them away.

"All right," she said brokenly; "I'll marry you if you want."

He did not try to embrace her, but almost shyly he put one big, warm hand over her little cold ones. "My little honey!" he said.

She raised her honest eyes, the tears still on her lashes.

"Only," she added, "it ain't really me that's doin' it."

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean, honey," he asked.

She withdrew one hand from his, and put it up to her face with a little bewildered gesture.

"I dunno exactly," she answered; and after a moment she repeated, "It ain't really me that's doin' it. I'll marry yer an' do ther very

best I kin by you, but — but I don't love yer, so yer won't be gittin' what's really me."

"But I dunno what you mean," he repeated, a trifle helplessly.

Linda shook her head. "I don't jist know what I mean neither, but I reckon it would all be different if I was marryin' a feller I keered for. It would be me — what I am sho' 'nough — then."

He was silent a moment. "Honey," he said, at last with an effort, "you don't *have* to marry me if you don't want."

"Yes, I do! Yes, I do have to!" she burst out. "He'd do something jist awful to mammy if I did n't. I know he would — he's jist a devil."

"I reckon I could keep him from doin' anything much," he returned in his slow voice.

"Oh, no, you could n't! You an' him'd jist git into er fight an' one or other of you 'd be kilt, an' it would be all my fault. I kinder like you, an' ther don't seem nothin' else ter do; 'cept fer mammy I'd run off somewheres to myself, but she's skeered an' ther don't seem to be no other way, an' — an' I do kinder like you."

"Lindy!" he burst out, and stopped, lacking

the words to express himself. "I know I ain't much," he went on presently, "an' I reckon I ain't allers lived like I ought ter; yer 're jist like er little innocent flower, an' yer jist don't know nothin'"—Again he broke off. "But, before God, Lindy, I'll do what's right by you," he got out at length with a rush of scarlet to his face.

CHAPTER VI

In the few short days before her marriage, Linda went about like a person only half awake. She moved through her everyday life, performing her share of the housework carefully and dexterously, but indifferently, as though she were in a dream.

"Lindy," her mother said anxiously once, "you don't seem right; you seem like you was kinder dazed."

"That's ther way I feel," the girl returned.

"What's ther matter? Does yer head hurt? Maybe that lick yer got is troublin' yer."

"Oh, no," Linda said listlessly; "it ain't my head that's hurt."

She had told Decker that she would marry him in a week; there seemed no particular reason for delay, and they had set the time for Saturday the fifteenth of June.

He came to see her every evening after his work at the sawmill was over, and they sat to-

gether on the small stoop in the summer twilight with the perfume of the honeysuckle above them, or wandered aimlessly about the yard while he told her of the house that the mill-owner had promised to build for them; and beyond that there seemed to be little else to talk about. He was always very kind, always very gentle with her in an awkward, inarticulate, almost reverential way. He rarely caressed her, and when he did, it was with a certain shy wonder that anything so lovely should have come into his rough life.

The other children looked upon Linda with awe and curiosity, her approaching marriage seeming to set her a little apart from the familiar home circle. George Stillwater, now that she had submitted to his will, developed a horrible coarse jocularity that would have been unendurable had Linda been fully awake to it. Mrs. Stillwater went silently about the house, her face looking more tired and small than ever, and her eyes, which were often red-rimmed from weeping, resting constantly and remorsefully upon Linda. Once Linda surprised her sewing on some flimsy white stuff.

"Why, mammy! What you makin'?" she asked.

Her mother spread the poor material out for her to see. "It's fer you, Lindy," she said. "It's —it 's yer weddin'-dress, honey. I got yer pappy ter git it yesterdy when he was at ther store. It ain't much" — she cast a wistful, deprecating glance at the girl — "but I kinder wanted you should have somethin' sorter nice, an' I reckon it 's er mother's place ter provide it."

Linda made a sharp gesture. "Oh, I don't want no fixin's fer my weddin'!" she said; and turning abruptly, she went into her own room, and shutting the door fast behind her, flung herself down upon her bed in a passion of weeping. But in a few moments she controlled herself, and drying her eyes, went back to her mother. The latter still sat where she had left her, but she had ceased sewing, her work had slipped hopelessly to the floor, and she was staring down at it through a mist of tears.

Linda laid a hand on her shoulder. "Mammy, honey," she said, "I think that's real pretty goods, an' — an' I'm mightily obliged ter yer." And after a moment's hesitation, she stooped

and kissed her mother awkwardly, caresses being rare between them.

"Oh, Lindy, Lindy!" the other burst out poignantly, "I know it's my fault — oh, I know it's all my fault, 'cause I jist can't help bein' skeered! But I tole you you was n't ter do it. It don't matter erbout me, honest, it don't, honey! — honest, it don't!"

Linda patted her shoulder. "Never mind," she whispered; "never mind, I reckon it'll be all right."

Two days later, arrayed in the poor little wedding-dress, Linda drove over with Mr. Decker to the county town of Wayside, and there they were married in the office of the justice of the peace.

Decker had a little money saved up from his work at the sawmill, and after the brief ceremony they went about and made the few necessary purchases for their housekeeping, and late in the day they loaded everything into the wagon and set off in the waning light for Freedom Ridge.

Through it all Linda had a dreamy feeling of unreality, and the long drive home through the

gathering twilight and final darkness was the strangest, most unreal part of it all. After the dark closed down upon them, Decker put his arm around her, as they sat together upon the high driving-seat, and pressed her head against his shoulder, but he did not say anything. Linda looked up into the immense, soft depths of the sky, and was glad of the stillness and peace of the night, and in spite of the bumping of the wagon she was lulled almost to sleep at last. Once at a small creek Decker let the horses' heads down, that they might drink, and as they waited there Linda was conscious through half-closed eyelids of the flicker of moonlight on the crinkled stream, of the cool, faint trickle of water through their wagon wheels, and of the sip, sip, and swallow of the horses drinking. Decker took one great hand clumsily and with a sort of wonder pushed back a lock of soft dark hair that had strayed over her forehead. She opened her eyes wide and stared up at him, and cupping his hand under her chin he turned her little face up to his in the white moonlight, and stooping suddenly he kissed her. "My little, little honey," he whispered.

CHAPTER VII

Almost a year had slipped away on Freedom Ridge, and May had swung round once more. It was early morning, and the fleecy curtain of mist was still over everything. It almost hid Armstrong Decker's little frame house, clinging in its patch of new ground to the side of the Ridge. A faint curl of smoke arose from the chimney, and presently the door opened and Linda looked forth. There was the romance and wonder of a spring dawn over the whole world. The breathless stillness of the event was broken only by the awakening of the birds. The sun, reaching softly through the mists, touched the sleeping world very delicately, very silently, very alluringly, with its long silver fingers. It was like a mother bending with tender, smiling eyes over her child to awaken it to some rare, unexpected pleasure. "Awake," the sun seemed to say, "awake, my beloved, and with the dreams still in your eyes, sing of the miracle of the day that God has bestowed

upon you!" And the world obeyed in bird song, and faint breaths of answering perfume.

Linda stood there quite still. She hardly seemed to breathe, she scarcely thought, her whole personality was so absorbed in its response to the reverence of the moment. Her delicately pure face was lifted unconsciously, her eyes were wide, and her lips were faintly parted. She drew a deep breath at length. "Dear Lord," she whispered, "you certainly did make er beautiful world!"

The ground on which their small house stood belonged to the Pritchard Lumber Company, for which Decker worked. The house was the company's, too, but Linda and Armstrong could do with it as they pleased, and might also make what use they liked of the acre of cleared land surrounding it — cleared, that is, save for a colony of stumps, and some thick undergrowth which was left.

There was a tiny strip of dooryard inclosed by a bit of rough fencing, and, as Linda stood there, her eyes were suddenly caught by a glimmer of white flowers in one corner. With a little cry of surprise, she ran swiftly over

and fell on her knees beside them. It was a small clump of pheasant-eyed narcissus that had burst suddenly into bloom.

"Why, where did you come from — where did you come from?" she cried softly in an ecstasy. She put both hands eagerly round the cup of one of the flowers and looked down into its pure wide-open face. "Oh!" she cried. "Oh! yer ther prettiest little thing I ever did see! Where *did* you come from!"

A sound behind her made her turn, and she perceived her husband standing in the doorway.

"Oh, Mr. Decker!" she cried, "look — jist look!"

He stepped heavily from the door-stone and coming over stood looking down at her.

"So you've done found 'em," he said.

She stared up at him. "Did you know all the time they was here?"

"I hid 'em in ther ground fer you last fall. I seed 'em advertised in er flower catalogue one of the fellers had over at ther mill, an' I reckoned they'd be what you'd like."

"An' they been here in ther ground all winter jist waitin' fer spring, an' I never knowed it,"

Linda breathed. She ran her fingers caressingly up and down the green stems, and even patted the ground lightly where the roots were hidden. Then she looked up at Decker, her eyes full of delight. "I never seed anything like 'em before," she said.

He smiled, rewarded by her pleasure. "I see somethin' as pretty as they is every time I look at you, honey," he answered.

She gave back his smile, but she was more concerned with the flowers than with his compliment. "I wonder what their name is," she murmured.

He shook his head. "I don't recollect their name, but they're some kind of a Easter flower, I reckon." He turned away. "Well, I'll go cut you up some wood 'fore I go to ther mill."

Linda rose also and went reluctantly indoors to get breakfast.

Her life, with its attendant round of outdoor and indoor work, was much the same as Decker's wife as it had been as George Stillwater's oldest girl, only with this extreme difference, that now she was practically her own mistress, and if it had been within his power, Armstrong

Decker would have given his wife her very heart's desire. She had never ceased to be for him a mysterious being, some one apart and above everything he had ever known. She accepted this admiration gratefully, if unemotionally, repeating often to herself, "He certainly *is* er good man!"

She moved quickly about her kitchen now, intent on preparing breakfast. The early freshness of the morning, the beauty of the spring weather, together with the wonder and surprise of her flowers, all combined to set her whole inner being alight with rapture, but the rapture only showed itself in a soft, happy crooning and in the starriness of her eyes. Outside, Decker whistled as he cut up her stovewood for the day.

At last breakfast was set upon the table, and Linda turned to the door. "Mr. Decker," she called, "you kin come on now."

It had never occurred to her to call her husband anything but "Mr. Decker."

"It certainly is er grand day," he said, as he dropped to his place at the table with a luxurious sigh of content.

"It is that," Linda assented. The loveliness

of the weather possessed them both, but those few constrained words were all they found to say about it.

A little scuffling noise made itself heard behind them, and turning they beheld Benny, Linda's small brother, in the doorway.

Mrs. Stillwater had died during the winter of a sudden sharp attack of pneumonia, and after her death, Linda had taken the baby to live with her. She had nursed her mother faithfully and tenderly through her illness and had been surprised at the last to see the little, timid, childlike woman gather a sudden dignity and courage with which to meet the great event of her life.

The baby, awakening to find himself all alone, had managed to escape from his cradle and crawl out to the kitchen in search of Linda. At the doorway he paused, head up like an inquiring terrapin, and upon his face a wide, triumphant smile, punctuated by a few teeth.

"Well, will you just look at him!" Linda exclaimed in admiration. "Come on to sister, honey, come on," she encouraged him, holding out her arms. Thus stimulated, he smiled more

widely than ever, and pulling himself upright by the door-frame, achieved a splendid toddling dash across the intervening space to the safety of her knee.

Linda caught him up with a hug.

"Did anybody ever *see* such a boy!" she cried.

The baby emitted little chuckling squeals of delight and stretched his waving arms toward Armstrong, yet, when the latter attempted to take him, he pretended panic and buried his face against Linda's shoulder.

"You little rascal!" Decker cried.

The breakfast was finished in a romp with the baby, but at length Linda set him upon the floor, and rising, began to clear the table.

"Well, I must be stepping erlong," her husband said, and took up his hat, yet at the door he turned and looked at Linda a moment. Then he came over to her.

"You liked the flowers, did n't you, honey?" he questioned.

Her eyes flashed up to him in eager gratitude. "Oh, they're just beautiful," she cried. "It certainly was good of you to git them!"

Suddenly he lifted her from her feet and held her passionately close. But it was only the outburst of a moment, and almost directly he set her down again. Yet he still kept his arm around her, pressing her head against his shoulder.

"Yer jist sech er little bit of er thing — jist sech a little mite," he said, half apologetically.

Linda submitted calmly enough to his caresses, but as she leaned against him her mind was concerned with the fact that his coat needed mending.

"Yer so little bit," he went on, "an' yit, even ef I put both arms right 'round you, you don't hardly seem to be mine."

He looked down at her wistfully.

"Lindy, honey," he demanded, "do you sho' 'nough belong to me?"

She raised her eyes to his in surprise.

"Why, er course I do," she answered. "Ain't I married you? This ole coat needs fixin' ergin," she went on presently. "Don't forgit to give it to me this evenin' when you come home."

He gave a little unconscious sigh, and released her. "Oh, honey," he said, "I reckon you ain't really what you might call awake yit —

yer so little an' so young." And with the words he went off to his work.

Linda gave Benny his breakfast, did the milking, tidied up the kitchen, and saw to the other morning duties. And then she picked the baby up and carried him out to inspect the wonderful flowers that had come so astonishingly into bloom.

"There, sweety, ain't them ther prettiest things you ever did see?" she demanded; and together they sat down by the flowers, under the clear blue stretch of the sky. Afterwards she and the baby went the rounds of the small establishment, looking at the pig and the various broods of chickens, and even had the great triumph, after an hour's silent watching, of discovering the old turkey hen's nest. Then it was time to prepare dinner, and Linda returned to her kitchen, the baby now fast asleep, and limply heavy on her arm.

She deposited him in his cradle in the bedroom and set about lighting her fire, resuming her little happy crooning of the early morning. She was making a tremendous noise with the stove-lifter, probing the ashes out of the grate,

when shadows fell across the doorway, and looking up, she beheld her father and sister Lily.

"Why, howdy," she said, in some surprise, wondering what could have brought them at such an hour.

"Howdy, Lindy," they responded heavily together, and stepping into the kitchen seated themselves in silence.

Linda stood by her stove, the lifter still in her hand, and looked at them inquiringly.

"Anybody sick?" she asked at length.

"No, I reckon everybody 's well as common," Lily responded, and fell silent again. She looked almost a grown woman now, though she was not yet sixteen. At her mother's death she had taken imperious charge of the household, and in look and bearing she grew every day more like her father, whose favorite she was.

There was something ominous in their strange and heavy silence, and Linda's heart began to beat more quickly, yet she turned mechanically back to her stove and began laying the kindling in the grate.

"You need n't ter start that there fire," Lily broke in suddenly, in a rough voice. "We've

come ter fetch yer home. Git yer clothes and Benny's tergether, an' come on 'fore Mr. Decker gits here."

Linda's eyes flew open in bewilderment. "What fer — why, what do yer want me home fer?" she demanded.

Her father rose angrily, and, taking the stove-lifter from her, dropped it into the wood-box, and gave her a sharp push toward the bed-room. "Git yer duds," he said. "Don't yer hear yer sister tellin' yer to come on?"

Linda shrugged herself angrily away from him.

"Yes, I hear what she says all right," she returned, "but I ain't takin' orders from her, nor you neither any more."

"All right," he retorted; "all right! Go on in your own way, only don't say I did n't warn ye."

"You better do like pappy says," Lily threatened. "You better come on home, Lindy, while you got ther chanst."

"I don't know what you all er talkin' erbout," Linda cried. "Er *course* I ain't goin' home without you give me er reason!"

"All right, you hard-headed little devil!" her father retorted, "take ther reason, then. Armstrong Decker's got ernother wife."

Linda flung out her hand to the back of a chair, and the blood poured into her cheeks.

"It's er lie!" she cried blindly.

"No, it ain't no lie — it's ther straight-out truth. Er feller come yesterday ter work at ther sawmill what used ter know Decker 'fore ever he came up in here, an' he said he hed er wife livin' down in Braxton County."

"It's er lie, er lie!" Linda cried again.

"All right, don't b'lieve it if yer don't want ter — but don't say I did n't act right by yer."

"Yes, you've acted right by me!" Linda burst out in furious sarcasm. "I'd think you'd be terrible proud of ther way you've acted by me."

A heavy step sounded outside, and in a flash Decker was among them. He gave one glance at Linda's face and then turned upon his father-in-law.

"Now, then, what's all this erbout?" he demanded, his voice very quiet.

Linda faced her father. "Yer tell him what you've jist told me," she commanded.

But Stillwater rose rather hastily. "No, I leave you all ter fix it up betwixt you," he said. "Come on, Lily, we must be steppin' erlong."

But Decker leaped across the room and slammed the door shut.

"You'll not be steppin' erlong till you've told me what yer doin' here," he said.

Linda came over close to him. "Mr. Decker," she said, "they say you've got er wife down in Braxton County. Is that ther truth?"

The man's face went a wild scarlet.

"Who says so!" he bellowed, doubling his fists and whirling upon Stillwater. "Who says that? Do you?"

But Linda interposed swiftly, and laid a firm, imperious hand on his shoulder.

"Wait," she said breathlessly. "Wait." She stood back a moment looking up into his face. "Tell me God's truth," she said slowly. "Am I yer wife?"

He put his arm around her shoulder and looked down at her. "Before God, Lindy," he said, "yer the only wife I got."

Linda drew a deep breath, clinging a little to him. "You all kin go on home now," she said.

"And be damned quick erbout it, too!" Decker added.

When they were alone, Decker drew Linda into a close embrace.

She leaned against him, very sure of his protection.

"I jist knowed it was all er lie," she said at length.

He drew his arm away suddenly and stood back. "Lindy," he said with an effort, and stopped. "Oh, honey!" he burst out at length, "yer jist so innocent I reckon you don't know nothin'."

He stood a moment longer looking at her, and Linda waited for him to go on, wondering a little. But at length he turned away without saying more, and Linda resumed her interrupted preparations for dinner.

Late that afternoon, while Decker was still at the mill, Linda's little sister Lidy came stealing into the kitchen and crept up to Linda's side, as she sat sewing.

"Oh, Lindy," she whispered. "Lily and pappy, they sent me over to fetch Benny home."

"To fetch Benny!" Linda cried.

"Yes; they say you can't keep him no more. An' — an', Lindy, they say you're bad, but that ain't so, you ain't bad, are you, Lindy?" She looked beseechingly up at Linda with a small, frightened face.

Linda put her arm around her, and the child buried her face in her lap. This little sister always reminded her sharply of her mother.

"An' — an' they say I ain't to come over here no more after just this one time ter fetch Benny home," she sobbed.

"Never mind, never mind," Linda comforted her. "They's jist mad now, but I reckon they'll git over it after er while."

"An' you ain't bad, aire you, Lindy?"

"I reckon I ain't as good as I ought ter be, honey, but I ain't bad like they say, an' don't you let 'em make you believe it."

The child hugged her close in silence. Then after a moment she looked up. "Lindy," she whispered shyly, "I think yer ther prettiest thing in all ther world. I do, honest!"

Linda laughed. But in a moment she grew sober. "I'll have ter git poor little Benny ready, I reckon," she said. "Oh, Lidy, aire you sure, right sure, they said he must come back?"

"They said they'd jist naturally skin ther hide off er me if I did n't bring him."

With a sharp gesture Linda turned away to the bedroom. Benny was taking a little extra nap, and Linda moved softly about making his tiny wardrobe into a bundle. Few enough little calico frocks they were, but Linda had made them all, and she lingered over them with wistful hands. There was one little ruffled white dress, his best one, that she dwelt upon especially. She had put her whole heart into the making of it; it was a veritable creation, and she felt toward it as an artist feels toward his finished picture. It was something that had been conceived in her brain, and realized with her heart and hands, and Linda regarded it with a sort of awe. She decided to dress him in it now.

She went over and took him up gently from his cradle. He woke with a trusting, sweet surprise, — an astonished delight, which seemed to say, "Why, here I am again, and the world

just as nice as ever!" and permitted himself to be dressed with a fine condescension.

At last he was all ready and Linda took him in her arms. "I'll carry him er piece of the way for you, Lidy," she said. And together they went silently out of the house and along the road leading to the Stillwater farm. At last, at the turn where the first glimpse of the house could be caught, Linda paused. "I can't go no farther," she said, and kissing the baby passionately, she handed him over to Lidy.

"Oh, Lidy, honey, be good to him!" she cried.

Not being used to Lidy, the baby burst into a flood of tears. "Take him along, Lidy, — take him along *quick!*" Linda begged.

Obediently Lidy gathered the baby upon one small hip, and his bundle of clothes on the other, and trudged off down the road, a frail, patient, little figure. Linda stood and watched them go. It was a desolate bit of road with the house far in the distance, and the top of the Ridge rising black against the sky. The frogs were beginning to call lonesomely here and there, and the baby's wail cut sharply through the still air.

He kept turning his chubby face over Lidy's shoulder, to stare back at Linda, and to stretch ineffectual arms to her. For a long time Linda could see the big, hurt tears running down his cheeks, but Lidy toiled patiently along without turning round, and at last they were lost to sight. Linda stood a long time staring at the blank road and listening to the baby's crying, as it came from farther, and farther away, and when at last she could hear it no longer, she turned homeward, the tears running fast down her own cheeks.

CHAPTER VIII

It was the next day and Linda was busy preparing Armstrong Decker's dinner. She moved quietly and there was none of the soft, light-hearted singing of the day before when Benny had been her companion.

She had just set a crock of milk upon the table when a woman and little boy appeared in the kitchen doorway. The woman was tall and raw-boned, with a large, white face, which still held the remains of a certain bold good looks. Her eyes were defiant, but her mouth drooped at the corners with a rather foolish expression. A rusty black hat, far too small for her, was perched upon her head, and beneath it her sandy hair was drawn back in a tight knot.

"Howdy," she said.

The word was jerked out more like a challenge than a greeting. And as Linda responded she wondered who the woman could be and where she had come from.

"Does Armstrong Decker live here?" the stranger demanded.

"He does," Linda answered.

"An' who might you be?"

"I'm Mr. Decker's wife," Linda answered simply. The woman's rough manner surprised her, but she had too little self-consciousness to take affront easily.

At Linda's words a slow evil mirth spread over the stranger's face. "You aire — aire you?" she said. And, laughing, suddenly she drew the boy close to her, and swept the soft felt hat from his tousled hair.

"Look at him," she commanded, and Linda looked.

And as she looked her heart began to beat wildly and something leaped into her throat so that she was almost choked. She put both hands upon the table and stared and stared down into the child's upturned, wondering face.

"A-ha!" the woman said; "I reckon you know *now* whose boy that is. Armstrong, he married me six year ago this very month down in Braxton County."

She put her hand triumphantly upon the boy's head, and pushed the heavy yellow hair back from his forehead.

"Ain't he ther livin' image of his pappy? Ain't he jist like Armstrong?" she demanded.

Linda continued to stare at the boy without speaking. He was a little fellow of four or five years, and returned her look with wondering, wide-open eyes as he leaned back against his mother. The woman was right; he was a horrible blended likeness of Decker and herself.

"Ain't he jist ther very image of Armstrong?" the woman persisted.

And at last Linda drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she whispered; "yes."

For a little while longer she stared down into the child's round face, and then turning away she began moving swiftly and quietly about the house. She took a large split hickory basket from a peg on the wall and placed a supply of biscuits, together with some other cold food in it. Then, going into the bedroom, she made up a small bundle of clothes, and stowed them as well in the basket, together with the book on flowers that Decker had given her. From under the

mattress she drew a small yellow bag, which had once held tobacco, but now contained a little hoard of money that she regarded as her own, as it came from the sale of the eggs and butter. Afterwards she took her sunbonnet and a heavy shawl from the bed, and, lifting the basket to her arm, turned back to the woman who still stood indifferently in the doorway watching with cold, sombre eyes.

"The flour 's over yonder in that poke," Linda said. "There's some coffee ready ground in the mill, an' ther spring's down in front of the house a little piece. Mr. Decker'll be gittin' home from work d'rectly an' 'll be wantin' his dinner. There's er speckled pullet jist hatchin' terday, and ther rusty black hen wants to set, but I 'lowed ter break her up — she ain't much es er mother. Ther cow'll be at ther stable at milkin'-time — she's always right good erbout comin' up."

She paused a moment looking about her. "I reckon that's all," she said at length.

"But what aire you goin' ter do?" the woman cried, her mouth dropping open in astonishment.

"Why, I'm goin' erway, er course," Linda said simply.

She placed her sunbonnet on her head, settled the basket on her arm, and stepping over the doorsill, went away down the path. At the gate she turned to call back, "There's er crock er cream up in ther branch all ready ter churn."

At the forks of the road leading to her father's house, Linda did not pause, but turned resolutely and swiftly along the track leading down the mountain. Presently as she walked she heard someone whistling in front of her, and, leaping hastily to one side, she hid among the thick brush bordering the road. And whistling happily and unconsciously, Armstrong Decker passed close beside her, returning early from the mill. Linda rose stealthily in her place, and stared, and stared after him, and suddenly, poignantly she saw him coming home to find her gone, and that other woman in her place. It struck her that his figure looked old and somewhat bent. Events had moved so quickly that she had hardly had time to feel any resentment toward him, and as she looked she saw again sharply the picture of his home-

coming. He would swing happily up the path and step in at the door, — "Well, howdy, little mistis," he always said when he came home, — and then, in place of herself, that other woman would turn round from the stove and greet him. She put her hands up to her face, and her throat ached and ached. "But he lied to me — he lied! he lied!" she whispered, whipping herself to anger; but on top of the words she cried, "Lord have mercy on him, he's seein' her now!" and catching up her basket she fled blindly away from the tragedy of that meeting — away from all her past surroundings, down the mountain and out into a new life.

CHAPTER IX

Paul Greenough lay stretched out full length upon the ground, and waited patiently. Patience was one of his great possessions. He always asserted that his stock of it had come to him from a Quaker grandmother, it being a theory of his that patience and Quaker blood always went together. But even without such an ancestry, it would not have been difficult to be patient on such a Heaven-sent day. It was the twelfth of May, and the weather, after many false starts, had at last decided to give over the fickleness of spring and settle down to its real summer work. The whole world was in the flood tide of life. The whole world, that is, save Paul Greenough. He was in attendance upon an old friend of his father's, who, in spite of very serious ill health, had insisted upon coming down to the mountains of West Virginia to negotiate the sale of a large tract of timber, having no faith in any one's business ability but his own, which, perhaps, was reasonable, as in a

long life he had seen many other men lose their fortunes through faith, but had seen his own always steadily increasing. But he was no longer a young man, and his physician, who had watched him anxiously for several months past, suddenly announced that if he persisted in leaving the comfort, and comparative security of Beacon Street for the uncertainties of the mountains of West Virginia, he must at least have a doctor in attendance. The announcement had come upon Mr. Wingate as an appalling surprise. That he, the independent, the rugged, the unbending, should have to stoop his uncompromising old neck to the yoke of physical weakness was unbelievable — it was also terrifying. Though he carried it off with his usual brusque manner, in his heart he was frightened. He had announced, moreover, that he would have no doctor save young Paul Greenough. "Doctors! Doctors!" he had snorted; "I see no reason for trusting any of them! But if I must have some one tagging around, I'll take Charles Greenough's boy — I've known him since he was a baby, and he'll know better than to take liberties with *me!*"

Paul certainly took no liberties, but he was in daily dread lest Death should fail to show the same tact. He had not meant to go with old Mr. Wingate, having his hands full, as it seemed to him, of far more appealing cases, but when he had called to say he would not go, and to suggest some one in his place, he had suddenly known — what Mr. Wingate had successfully concealed from all his other acquaintances — that this old, hard-fisted friend of his father's, under all his stiff exterior, was as frightened, and as human and alone, and as much in need of help as any of his more pathetic North End patients. So he had come, but after all there was very little that he could do save be ready for whatever might happen. So while Mr. Wingate struggled with timber dealers, and browbeat his secretary, Paul strolled through the big mountain tract of timber that Mr. Wingate had bought up years ago when land in West Virginia had been cheap. Thus at the present moment, while the growing world was so busy, he had nothing more onerous to do than to lie upon the warm earth and study a pink lady's-slipper, inside the painted lip of which he could hear

the buzzing complaint of an imprisoned bee. The sun was drowsily warm, and the flecking shadows from the expanding leaves danced silently back and forth; the wind came and went in perfumed waves, and not far away a little mountain stream trickled faintly. Paul was conscious of being very drowsy, and felt if the bee did not hasten somewhat he would fall asleep before he had the opportunity of verifying his botany's statement as to how this particular orchid dusted her pollen upon her bee visitors. His whole being absorbed the sweetness of the weather, and it was pleasant to have this little space of spring peace, and warm assurance of the kindliness of Nature, after a winter packed full of the suffering of humanity, such as his profession brought him in touch with in the overcrowded tenement districts. As he lay there, face after face of his patients looked wistfully forth from his mind. Children's faces they were for the most part. The pinched, alert, nervous faces of city children. Little Concettas and Pietros, Isidores and Esthers, of the North End, all hungry and thirsty for just such air as he was breathing so plentifully at that mo-

ment. How could one get all the North End to the mountains? Or would it be better to take the mountains to the North End? His mind took up the problem sleepily, and in a moment he was hastening back and forth on endless fantastic journeys, carrying great armsful of the sweetness of out of doors, made up of sunshine and spring weather, flower perfume, and bird song, to scatter broadcast, through the evil-smelling city streets. And presently Concetta, Pietro, Isidore, and Esther had caught the spirit of it and were laughing and running with him, with pails and baskets, wagons made of soap-boxes, and broken baby-carriages, all to be used in carrying the sweetness of outdoors into the North End.

"Howdy! What aire you lookin' at that moccasin flower for?"

The words came in a soft hesitating drawl, and on the instant all the little running Italian and Jewish children of his dream disappeared, and Paul started broad awake, and looked around. A slim girl, clad in blue calico, stood before him. On one arm she carried a large basket; the other hand was stretched out to rest lightly against

the trunk of a dogwood tree. The dogwood was all in full bloom, and the canopy of white flowers held up against the blue sky made an exquisite setting for her figure. She had removed her sunbonnet so that her head was bare, and her dark eyes looked at the young man fearlessly with the unconscious, engaging frankness of a child. He had not heard her approach, and it was something astonishing and mysterious to wake and see her suddenly there.

"Why — why, where did you come from?" he gasped.

She smiled a little at his surprise. "From Freedom Ridge, back over yonder, in the woods," she answered, taking her hand an instant from the tree to wave it in the general direction of the north. The dogwood, slightly shaken by the gesture, shed a little silent shower of white petals down upon her dark hair and over her dress, setting, as it were, the seal of the woods upon her.

"Are you sure?" Greenough cried, almost involuntarily. "Are you sure you came from over yonder? I believe you're a dryad and

stepped just this minute out of that dogwood tree."

She looked at his strong, clean-shaven face, at the brown eyes, the eyebrows of which had a comical trick of elevating themselves in a peak, and at the whimsical, smiling mouth, and she herself smiled a little, irresistibly.

"What 's er dryad?" she questioned, her articulation very soft and slow, and hesitating a little over the unfamiliar word.

"Why, a dryad is a lady who lives in a tree — as you know very well, being one yourself," he retorted.

Her smile deepened, as her fancy caught stride with his. "It would er been er right close fit," she said, making her slim fingers almost meet around the tree trunk. "'Sides," she added, "I would n't er picked er dogwood anyhow. They's mighty pretty now" — she raised her dark face to look up at the white blooms, and some more of the petals drifted down upon her — "but they ain't so much the rest of the time. I like er sugar-maple better."

He bowed. "I don't for a moment doubt that

the sugar-maple is your ancestral tree. When did you emerge?"

"Emerge?" she questioned, showing him again by the soft inflection of her voice that she was meeting the word for the first time.

"Come out," he translated.

"Oh, I come out right soon in ther spring, 'fore the sap commenced to rise. It's mighty wet inside er maple when ther sugar-water's runnin'."

"Yes," he assented. "I can quite imagine it might be."

"What was you lookin' at that moccasin flower fer," she persisted, returning to her first question which had so startled him.

"There's a bee inside it. I want to see which way it comes out."

She came nearer, and kneeling down put her ear close to the flower to listen an instant to the bee's imprisoned complaint.

"My! but he's mad, ain't he?" she said, smiling up at Greenough. "I did n't know anybody but me keered about studyin' flowers," she added presently.

"Do you care?"

She nodded. "I've keered erbout them ever since I could recollect. I reckon because they's ther prettiest things I know. Look," she added, and, turning quickly, she reached into her basket and drew from its depths a large book. This she opened and turned the leaves eagerly until she came to the illustration of the pink cypripedium.

"There you aire, honey," she said softly, addressing the flower, and holding its pictured self up before it.

"Why, where did you get that book?" Greenough exclaimed, surprised at this evidence of sophistication.

She paused, her slim brown hand resting on the picture of the lady's-slipper, and stared straight before her a moment.

"My — er feller I knowed give it ter me," she said at length briefly.

There was a faint tremble in her voice. "She started to say my sweetheart gave it to me, or whatever the mountain equivalent is," Greenough told himself.

"But why do you want to see the bee come out?" she said presently, returning to the flower.

"I want to see if he comes out where the botany says he does."

"The — the what?"

"The botany, do you mean?"

She nodded. "Aha. What is that — er botany?"

"Why, it's a book about flowers. That's a botany," he added, laying his hand on her book. "Botany, you know, is the study of plants."

"Botany is the study of plants," she repeated softly, unconsciously copying his exact pronunciation. "No, I did n't know it. I reckon," she added, looking at him questioningly, "there's er whole heap I don't know."

He smiled in spite of himself at her ingenuous seriousness. "There's a whole heap that nobody knows," he returned.

"But I reckon," she persisted, "that you knows er heap more'n me. You ain't from 'round here, aire you?"

She had slipped down on the ground beside him now, and her great eyes fixed themselves upon him with absolute sincerity. That this strange, lovely, little creature should have

stepped suddenly out of the woods, and should be sitting beside him asking him questions, seemed to Greenough almost more impossible than his wild dream of carrying the mountains to the North End, and yet, for all its impossibility, there was a curious knowledge at the back of his mind that told him it was the most deeply natural and inevitable thing that had ever befallen him.

"No, I'm not from around here," he answered. "I come from a place called Boston. Did you ever hear of it?"

She paused in consideration for a moment, frowning a little in an effort to remember. Then she nodded. "A-ha," she said, "I 've heard of it." She paused again, searching her memory for more. "Oh, I recollect now," she cried, a light in her eyes; "it's ther capital of Massachusetts. I learnt that at school."

"Good!" he laughed. "What else do you know about it?"

She shook her head. "That's all," she said, "'cept, er course, I know Massachusetts is up to the North."

"Boston people think a good deal of their

city," he ventured, a certain whimsical expression about his mouth.

"Do they?" she said politely. "I think it's nice for folks to think er heap of the place they live at. I think er powerful lot of these mountains."

"I should think you would," he cried warmly. "They are beautiful."

A smile of pleasure curved her lips delicately. "I think they're jist lovely," she said. "But, then, I ain't knowed anything else," she added. "I reckon Boston ain't like this at all; this is right much in ther back woods."

"Well," he admitted, "they don't have so much in the way of back woods there — they have the Back Bay instead," he added.

"The Back Bay? Is that anything like the back woods?"

"Well, no," he admitted, "it really is n't."

He looked at her still with smiling eyes, and she interpreted the look and laughed, a delicious ripple of understanding mirth.

"I reckon it must be jist as different as can be," she said. "Oh! lookey— lookey yonder!" she cried suddenly and pointed to the lady's-

slipper. For just an instant her hand brushed his arm excitedly. The flower was shaking violently with the struggle of the bee.

"Where will he come out?" she whispered, regarding Greenough as an oracle.

"If he does what he ought to, he'll come out just there at the side." He indicated the exit by the throat of the orchid.

For a moment they watched in silence, and then a black head was thrust into view at the opening Greenough had pointed out, and with an angry buzz and struggle the bee extricated himself and flew away, leaving the flower bobbing up and down from his spring.

"Well, I never seen that before!" the girl cried in soft delight. "He did jist like you said he would. — You certainly do know er heap." Her dark face paid him almost reverential tribute. "I s'pose there's places where er person kin learn all them sort er things?" she pursued presently.

"About the bees and flowers, you mean?"

"Yes, an' erbout all them other things, like you know."

"Oh, but I don't know much," he demurred.

She looked at him seriously. "I don't b'lieve you ought ter say that," she said. "I feel pretty nigh sure you know er heap, an' if you do, you ought n't ter act like you don't."

Greenough was conscious of a sudden feeling of guilt. Certainly, when he thought of all the years and money spent on his rather elaborate education, it was indeed affectation to pretend ignorance to this child of the mountains.

"Well," he admitted, "I suppose I do know something — or at least I certainly ought to. But you could hardly expect me to say so."

"But, I don't see why not, if it's ther truth," she persisted.

They looked at each other for a little while in silence. Greenough was consumed with curiosity, but he felt she was like some little shy wild animal, whom a too close scrutiny might frighten away.

"I'm mighty hungry," she said suddenly, sighing a little.

"Hungry," he cried, overwhelmed. "Good Heavens! Why did n't you say so? — Here, take this." He dived into his loose coat-pocket and produced a bundle wrapped in a napkin.

"I'm afraid it 's only bread and butter, but it's better than nothing. My landlady put it up for me in case I got hungry on my walk."

"But I don't want ter eat your snack."

"Oh, take it — I'm not in the least hungry. Please take it," he urged.

"Well"—she consented at last and stretched out an eager hand. "My! but that's good lightbread," she added, as she bit into a slice. "It's as good as I kin make. Lightbread's right hard ter git jist right—that's ther reason most everybody generally jist has sody biscuits. But if you notice," she confided, "when anybody gits sick, they most always seems to want er piece er lightbread ther first thing — lightbread and tea. It jist so happens," she went on, "that I did n't have but er little bit ter eat last night, an' nothin' at all this mornin', an' that tastes mighty good."

"Heavens!" he cried, deeply concerned. "But why was that? Why did n't you have anything to eat?"

"Well, you see I'm jist trampin' erlong, an' I'd eat up all I fetched erway with me."

"Are you all alone — do you mean to say you

are tramping through the woods all by your self?" he cried, aghast.

She nodded at him over her second slice of bread. "Aha," she said.

"But you ought not to be!" he cried. "What makes you do it? How long have you been tramping? Why, it's an awful thing for you to do."

"Why, no, it ain't so awful. I started out three mornin's ago, and nothin' ain't happened to me."

"But you ought n't to — it's awful — it's an awful thing for you to be out in the woods all alone," he persisted. "Why, you're just a child."

"Why, no, I ain't," she answered, in surprise. "I'm right old — I'm seventeen goin' on eighteen; — how old aire you?"

"I?" he laughed. "Oh, I'm twenty-nine going on thirty. But, honestly," he added, leaning toward her in deep concern, "you ought not to be going about like this. Why are you doing it — did you run away from home?"

A deep color flushed over her face. "I did n't exactly run away; I jist come away," she said.

"But why did you do it?" he asked gently. He had seen too much of the rough side of life in his practice not to suspect that there might be a tragedy here in the background.

"There jist was n't no place left for me ter stay."

"No place for you to stay? Why not?"

Her eyes stared sombrely past him into the green woods.

"My folks did n't act right by me," she said in a low voice.

Greenough made a little, half-unconscious sound of compassion.

"What did they do?" he said.

Suddenly to his surprise she dropped her face to her knees, drawing her arms tight. He thought his questions had moved her to tears, and involuntarily he put out a quick solicitous hand and touched her shoulder.

"Forgive me — I am so sorry," he begged.

At his touch and at the sympathy of his tone, she raised her head with a quick gesture, and looked at him in surprise. He saw that she had not been crying, but for some reason had chosen to hide the deep crimson of her cheeks. Now,

however, as she looked at him and realized the kindness and sympathy of his face, the tears filled her eyes slowly. But she was too proud to notice them and faced him bravely, a little creature who in spite of her gentle gayety had somehow been deeply hurt.

"Could n't you tell me all about it?" he asked gently.

For a moment he saw a flash of eagerness leap into her eyes, but afterwards she shook her head.

"I think I'd like ter tell you — oh, I'd like ter tell you — I reckon you'd understand," she said. "But — someway I jist can't."

And looking at her he realized that she did, indeed, wish to tell him, but, for some reason, could not.

"Well, never mind," he said, and touched her hands, with a quick, reassuring pressure. "But you must n't go on tramping like this. Where are you going?"

"I dunno," she admitted, shaking her head.

"Have n't you any other relations — any other folks to go to?"

"No — nobody. But I don't keer," she added

suddenly, as though to reassure him. "It's kinder nice not to belong ter nobody."

"But — are n't you frightened out in the woods alone?"

"Why should I be? There ain't nothin' ter happen ter me; there ain't no kind of big varmints in these woods no more."

"But you must n't do it — you must n't," he protested.

"There ain't nobody to stop me," she said simply.

He got up and began to pace abstractedly up and down, while she regarded him with intent eyes. At last he paused in front of her, struck by a sudden thought. "Why, you have n't even told me your name," he said.

"My name 's Lindy," she answered.

"Lindy? Lindy what?"

"That's all — just Lindy."

"But you must have another name — what is your family's name?"

"My family's name don't belong to me no more, I reckon."

"Do you mean to say you are *married?*" he cried.

For a moment she was silent, considering. "Why, no, I ain't married," she said at length.

He knelt down beside her and took her hand.

"Look here," he said. "Look here, Lindy, you don't understand, but really you can't go on all alone like this. Something horrible may happen to you. Now, listen to me. I know of a good school with some ladies who are old friends of mine where you could go, and where you could learn all sorts of things — all the things you want to know about the bees and flowers. Won't you let me arrange to have you go there?"

She studied his face for a long time, without speaking. It was a strong face, in spite of a certain whimsical twist of expression, and Concetta and Pietro, Isidore, and all the rest were very familiar with that affectionate, understanding expression about the mouth. They could all have told her that, if he could, Dr. Greenough would have placed himself in front of any of the little things of the world whenever there was danger of their being hurt. But at last Linda drew her hands away with a little sigh and shook her head.

"I'm much erbliged ter you," she said. "I

certainly am erbliged, but — I can't." She said the words with a certain finality. "Yer mighty kind," — she paused, searching his face again. "I reckon yer always doin' kind things for folks, ain't yer?" she demanded abruptly.

He laughed and flushed in embarrassment. "Why, no, I'm not."

But she still continued to study him with her honest, direct eyes. "I feel mighty sure," she said at last, "that yer er heap kinder 'an most folks is."

A few crumbs of bread had fallen upon her blue calico lap, and she picked them up as she spoke and ate them absently.

"Are you still hungry?" he demanded.

"Kinder — jist er little," she admitted.

He leaped up. "Stay here," he commanded, "and I'll run back to the place where I'm boarding and get you something more — I won't be long." And with the words he was off at a run.

Linda watched his hurrying figure through the open spaces of the woods until a little dip in the mountain hid him from view.

"Well! Did anybody ever *see* such er feller!" she whispered softly to herself with a little half

laugh. She sat a moment longer, the little smile still on her lips, and then all at once it disappeared, and she, too, rose quickly to her feet crying breathlessly, "I got ter go! Oh! I reckon I *got* to go!" She tumbled her book hastily back into her basket, and, snatching up the latter, gave one last look at the sunlit place of their meeting, and then, turning her back, ran swiftly away and in a moment was swallowed into the green mists of the woods.

And presently, when Greenough reappeared, hatless and breathless, with a fresh supply of food, the woods were silent and empty.

He paused, glancing about eagerly. "Where are you?" he cried softly at first, and then louder, and at last in a shout. "Where are you? Where are you, Linda?" He dropped the food and began to run madly through the woods, first in one direction and then in another, calling to her all the time — "Linda! Linda! Where are you Linda!" — and coming back constantly, hopefully, to the place of meeting. But she was gone, as suddenly and mysteriously as she had appeared. And at last he paused, baffled, and spent with running, and almost inclined to be-

lieve it had all been a dream. He stood still, considering. There was nothing he could do. Even supposing he summoned a search party there was little likelihood of their finding her in the great woods, particularly if she did not choose to be found, and even if he did find her, what then? What right had he over her? None, certainly. He was powerless. She had come for a moment into his life, and then had slipped away again, as frail, as illusive and free as a humming-bird.

For a time he stood bewildered, realizing it all, then, rousing himself, he went slowly over and plucked the pink lady's-slipper almost as in a dream, and placed it in the leaves of his notebook together with a few of the white dogwood petals. Then he turned lingeringly homeward.

CHAPTER X

When Linda gathered her things together and fled from the spot where she and Paul Greenough had watched the lady's-slipper together, she ran and walked very fast for a long time through the woods almost at random, but at last, just as the peaceful gray mantle of dusk began to fall, she came upon a neglected clearing which was almost overrun by low sumac bushes, thorn and crab apples. The latter were in bloom and the dusk was laden with their fragrance. Not far from the edge of the woods was an old, tumble-down stone chimney, and beside it grew a few twisted apple trees, and an unpruned rosebush covered with pink buds and blossoms. Linda stole across the comparative open of the clearing to this spot and looked about her. "There's been er house here, sometime," she said softly. She was as silent and as alone as some little wild creature of the woods, and there was to her, in spite of all that had led up to it, a certain keen and passionate delight

in thus owning herself and being absolutely free and independent in this wild world. The soft blue-gray evening sky arched over her in an immense sweep, the tree-toads and crickets and all the vocal company of evening chorused here and there; while at a little distance a brown thrush emitted from time to time its liquid, flutelike note, exquisite drops of golden sound falling through the damp, restful peace of the evening.

Linda sighed with content. "I reckon I'll spend ther night with you all, if you don't keer," she said politely to the apple trees and rosebush and thrush.

Under a thick shelter of thorn bushes she spread her heavy shawl, and lying down wrapped it snugly about her. She was still hungry and not a little tired, but in spite of all a great peace engulfed her as her limbs relaxed happily upon the broad bosom of the earth. She pressed her cheeks close against the ground, and the short crisp grass whispered in her ear. It was like laying her head upon the broad comforting bosom of some large-souled woman, one who would protect and comfort and understand.

"It's jist like you was a big mother to me, ain't it?" she murmured to the earth.

She had learned at school that the earth was moving rapidly around the sun, and, as always with her, it required only a hint of fact to give wings to her fancy, and now, as she stared up and up into the soft sky, through the quivering thorn leaves, her gaze seemed to penetrate layer after layer of faintly moving clouds, and she could almost feel herself borne swiftly and smoothly through space, bosomed high upon the earth, with nothing between her and infinity save the canopy of thorn leaves. Her lashes swept softly down upon her cheeks and her small tired self seemed merged in a mighty reality. It was as though a great soothing hand closed over her to smooth out all the hurt and shame of her life, and to wipe away her resentment toward Armstrong Decker and toward her father.

"I reckon, maybe it was jist their nature an' they could n't help theirselves," she murmured excusingly. "Take keer of 'em all, please, God," she whispered sleepily; and then, as her thoughts reverted to the episode of the early afternoon,

she added, "An' take keer of that feller that was watchin' ther mocassin flower — fer he's er mighty good man, I reckon." So with her cheeks pressed close against the earth, the faint breeze blowing kisses through her hair, and the evening noises in her ears, she drifted happily and trustfully off to sleep.

If one goes to sleep at dusk, one wakes at dawn, and Linda opened her eyes with the chirp of the first bird. Together with the apple trees and thorn bushes, she was enveloped in the heavy mist of the morning. It was damp and penetrating, and she shivered as she stretched her cramped limbs. It was the first time in her wanderings that she had actually slept in the open. The first night she had chanced upon an old shed left standing where a sawmill had set, and had taken shelter there. The next night she found a pile of pine boughs, and, creeping into their still faintly resinous depths, had found a delightfully comfortable bed, though her heart had reproached her a little because she had dislodged a terrified rabbit. "But I reckon you'd be goin' out fer ther night pretty soon anyhow," she had apologized.

She stood up now among the bushes, and shook the dew from her shawl.

"I ain't so used ter sleepin' out as you all aire," she told the crab apples, "an' I don't find er blanket er mist so overly warm, so I'll jist tell you all good-bye an' take my foot in my hand an' step erlong."

She settled her things once more in her basket, and going over, picked a few roses from the old bush, "jist ter remember you all by," she said; then, nodding farewell to the spot that had sheltered her, she set forth anew. But though she had not let the crab apples guess it, there was no denying that she was very stiff and cold, and, above all, most extraordinarily hungry.

"I jist *got* ter git me somethin' ter eat from somewheres soon," she told herself.

Heretofore she had kept continuously to the woods, avoiding the cleared farmlands wherever possible; but now she was too hungry to pursue this course longer, and she struck resolutely down the mountain-side, hoping to come upon a farm in the valley below.

She had tramped so far with only the vague

intention of swinging as many miles as possible back over her shoulder before being forced to seek the open, where she hoped to obtain work of some kind. She did not know where she was, but that she had not walked in a circle, she was almost certain, for she had kept persistently to the tops of the ridges and so guided herself. She guessed that Freedom Ridge must be some fifty or sixty miles behind her now, and she felt almost safe from pursuit, though, indeed, she hardly believed that there would be any effort made to find her. Certainly her father would not bother himself about her, and what possible claim could Decker have upon her now?

As she moved down the mountain, she caught all at once the irregular sound of a cow bell below her.

"Well, now," she whispered delightedly, "I never thought I'd hear ther breakfast bell so soon. Yes'm, I'm comin'," she cried, in answer, as the bell clanged again through the white stillness. Following the sound, she hurried down the hillside, and pushing through some close underbrush at the bottom came out into an open field. How big it was she could not tell, for the

curtain of mist still hung over everything, but she could see the dim form of an old blue-white cow not far away. She was contentedly engaged in obtaining her breakfast and as she cropped the grass, the bell about her neck clanked in answer to every mouthful.

She jerked up her head and started back a little at Linda's sudden appearance.

"Howdy," Linda said, and the cow, evidently reassured, after a moment's scrutiny lifted one hind leg and leisurely scratched the back of her ear with her hoof. This accomplished, she blew one or two deep, inquiring breaths over the grass, and then returned to her grazing.

"Well, I don't think that 's so very polite," Linda remonstrated, "but," she added, "I don't mind you, so long 's you don't mind me."

Producing a tin cup from the basket she approached, and running an experienced hand down the cow's flank said, "So-woh-gal," in the voice of authority. It was certainly not the cow's accustomed time for being milked, nor was this the person she was used to having do it. But Linda's touch from long experience was

an assured one, and after one or two attempts to move off, the cow resigned herself, and Linda filled her cup again and again, and drank the milk thirstily.

"My lands, but that's good!" she cried at length with a happy sigh. "An' I'm powerful erbliged to you, ole sister," she added, giving the cow a little grateful pat.

By this time the fog had lifted and the sun was shining in full splendor upon the drenched landscape, finding itself mirrored in all the little flashing drops and clusters of dew. The birds chirruped and sang and Nature had again lifted her curtain upon a new day, with as much impressment and lavishness of scenic effect as though such a thing had never occurred before.

Warmed and fed, and very content, Linda looked about her, and found that she was at the head of a broad, cleared valley stretching away into the distance, with the mountains on either side of it flowing north and south in majestic lines like deep, long-sustained chords of music. Across several fields she caught sight of a large frame house set upon a bluff. A well-traveled

road ran down the valley between rows of zig-zag fencing. Linda put both arms high above her head and stretched herself up on tiptoe to meet the warmth and glory of the day. A little meandering stream across the meadows, half hidden in its fringe of willow bushes, next attracted her attention.

"I reckon I'd better wash up, too," she murmured, "seein' as the day 's so fine an' clean."

Crossing over she rinsed her tin cup in the clear, delicious water, and then stood an irresolute moment upon the bank. She was all alone. The bushes made a silvery screen about her and it was still very early in the morning. With a low ripple of excited laughter she slipped out of her clothes, and in a moment plunged into the water. It was nowhere very deep, but the stream was a little swollen by the spring rains and the water of the pool she had chosen came rippling high up about her shoulders. She did not know how to swim, but she splashed up and down for a few riotous moments, and then, coming dripping to the shore, dried herself hastily upon some of her discarded garments, and then dressed in the change of clean clothes

she had tucked into her basket. She even slipped into a fresh calico dress, a dark red one, sprigged with white dots, and, rolling up her soiled and torn blue one, put it away in her basket. Then having smoothed her soft, dark hair into place as best she could, she stuck the pink rosebuds into it as a final touch of gayety to match the day, and straightened up with a sigh of satisfaction — as fresh and fair as the morning.

A twig snapped sharply behind her, and whirling round, Linda stared straight into the eyes of a tall lady standing among the bushes and regarding her.

"My lands!" Linda gasped. "How long have you been standing there?"

The other flushed a faint guilty pink.

"I — I'm awfully sorry," she stammered.

Linda was in a towering rage.

"Well, I should think you *would* be sorry!" she stormed. "I should think you *would* be! I'd like ter know what business you have er sneakin' 'round through ther bresh that away, an' spyin' on folks!"

"I'm sorry — I do beg your pardon," the lady pleaded again.

Linda turned away and began packing her things into her basket, her cheeks flaming crimson.

"A person kin always cough, er tramp on er stone er somethin' ter let ernother person know they're there," she said.

"I — I'm afraid I forgot to cough," the other said humbly. "But please don't mind me," she added — "just look, I'm quite old. Why, I even have some gray hairs."

Linda stole a look at her, but failed to see any gray in the dark coils of hair on the head above her.

"I don't see none," she returned. "An' yer face is mighty young — how old aire you, anyhow?"

"Why, I'm twenty-eight."

Linda's expression cleared somewhat. "Well, that is old, sho' 'nough," she conceded. "Why, that makes you mighty nigh old ernough ter be my mother."

The other looked a trifle disconcerted.

"And how old is your mother?" she asked.

Linda straightened up and looked at her out of the depths of her soft, deep eyes.

"I reckon she ain't no age now," she said; "she's dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the other cried softly, again confused.

Linda thought of the frail, frightened mother to whom life had appeared so terrible.

"I ain't so sorry," she returned. "Ef what ther preacher says is true, she must be a heap better off where she is."

After that there was a little pause between them. The stranger was evidently embarrassed, but Linda, her unconsciousness once more restored, regarded her frankly. She had never seen any one like her before. The woman was tall, with a slender figure that was kept from angularity by a certain quiet grace. There was this same redeeming trick about her face. It was thin and dark, and the features were irregular, but softened by a rather wistful expression, and the attractiveness was added to by a pair of very deep and thoughtful gray eyes. She was dressed in an immaculately crisp linen frock, the skirt of which she held daintily up out of the dew.

"Where do you live?" she asked presently.

Linda laughed suddenly.

In the last few moments the stranger had seen the girl's face radiant with the delightful feel of the water; then flushed and angry, and sad as she thought of her mother, and now she saw it lighted by mirth and she registered it in her mind as one of the most extraordinarily mobile countenances she had ever seen.

"Why," said Linda, "I reckon I jist live out of doors. I'm jist travelin'."

"Oh!" said the lady, at a loss, "Where did you come from?" she inquired after a pause.

Linda looked about her a little uncertainly.

"I dunno exactly," she said, "but I think it was back yon way," and she waved her hand vaguely in the direction from which she supposed she had come. "I come from off Freedom Ridge."

"And where are you going now?"

"I ain't bound fer no particular place — I'm jist trampin' erlong."

"You are just tramping all alone through the mountains!" the other gasped. "But how extraordinary! Are the girls down here in the habit of doing that?"

"How do you mean, 'down here'?" Linda asked.

"Why, I mean down here in the South. I come from the North."

"Oh." Linda was silent a moment. "No," she answered presently, "I never heered of no other girl doin' it."

"But are n't you scared?"

"No, there ain't nothin' ter be skeered of — 'scared,' do you call it?" Linda was taking note that the woman's voice and way of speaking were different from any she had ever heard.

"Yes, that's what we call it where I come from."

"Well, we calls it 'skeered' on Freedom Ridge," Linda returned. "I reckon different places has different names for things," she added tolerantly.

The lady smiled. "Well, you may call it 'skeered' or 'scared,' but it amounts to the same thing in the end," she said.

"Well, ain't that ther truth!" Linda assented. "It ain't ther name of er thing so much as what it feels like that makes it so."

"What is your name?"

"Lindy."

"Lindy? And what is the rest of it?"

Linda gave a little shake of the head.

"I dunno."

"You don't know? Don't know what your *name* is?" the other cried.

"No, I don't know," the girl returned. And it was true. In her ignorance she honestly did not know whether her name was now Stillwater or Decker.

"But what is your father's name — his last name, I mean?"

"Stillwater."

"Then, don't you see — of course, you are Linda Stillwater."

Linda made no reply to this.

"An' what might your name be?" she asked after a moment.

"My name is Annette Whittemore," the other replied, "and I'm making a visit to my sister and brother-in-law, — they live in that house over there on the hill," she added, waving her hand in the direction of the house Linda had noticed already.

From across the meadows there came at this moment the sound of a bell.

"Oh, there's my breakfast bell," the lady exclaimed; then struck by a sudden thought she said, "Are you hungry?"

"I certainly am," Linda returned with conviction.

"Then come with me, and I'll give you some breakfast," Miss Whittemore said, smiling at the girl's frank confession.

"Well, I don't keer ef I do," Linda answered, and together they went across the field and out to the highroad.

Linda glanced occasionally at her companion and was conscious that she liked her.

Suddenly the lady looked at her rather searchingly.

"Do your family know where you are?" she asked.

"I reckon not," Linda returned.

"You ran away from home, then?"

"I dunno es I ran erway, — I come erway," Linda said, even as she had replied to Paul Greenough.

"Is your father living?"

"Yes," said Linda. "An' I got two sisters and two brothers."

"Why did you leave them?"

Linda stared away in front of her.

"My father did n't act right by me," she said, at length.

"Did n't act right? Why, what did he do?"

"He wanted me ter marry er feller I did n't want to, an' when I said I would n't he slapped me in ther face an' I jumped on him, and then he jist knocked me dead fer er while."

Annette Whittemore was silent for a space, somewhat appalled by this revelation.

"Why did n't you want to marry the man your father wanted you to," she asked at length.

"I did n't keer nothin' erbout him. He's er whole heap older'n me — why, he's er real old man."

Together they came at last to the house, and, entering through a wide sunlit hall, Annette led the way out to the kitchen where she left Linda in charge of a large, gray-haired, rosy-cheeked Irishwoman who was preparing breakfast.

CHAPTER XI

Having disposed of Linda, Miss Annette Whittemore passed through the back part of the house, with her easy, swinging grace, and entered the dining-room in search of her own breakfast. There she found her sister and brother-in-law, Gerald Crenshaw, already seated. Crenshaw rose, his napkin in his hand, and drew her chair out for her.

"Been out for an early stroll, Annette?" he inquired. "It's a magnificent day, is n't it?" He was rather a heavily built man with a florid complexion, and was dressed in riding-clothes.

"Have you been seeking inspiration in the dawn?" her sister asked as she poured out Annette's coffee. She looked remotely like Annette, but was older and plumper, and more placid; she had none of Annette's wistful restlessness of expression.

Beyond nodding good morning, Annette did not reply immediately. She sat down quietly enough, and unfolding her napkin began on her

strawberries, but there was a hint of suppressed excitement about her.

"One suspects that Annette has had an adventure," Crenshaw remarked to his wife with a half-teasing laugh.

"Nonsense," the latter returned; "adventures don't happen in this peaceful valley."

"Well, then, an adventurette — a little adventure, at least," he persisted. "What was it, Annette? Did that old ewe chase you again, or did you think you discovered moonshiners up on Job's Knob?"

"Oh, Jerry, it would n't be anything as material as that!" his wife demurred. "She's captured an impression — or an inspiration. She's seen three drops of dew on a pink wake-robin, or the reflection of the willows in the creek, and she's been leaning and loafing and inviting her soul over that."

Annette, having finished her berries, laid down her spoon very quietly.

"I've captured more than an inspiration," she said. "I've captured a human being." There was a little shake of suppressed excitement in her voice.

"Why, Annette!" her sister exclaimed.

"Yes," Annette affirmed. "Mary is giving her some breakfast in your kitchen at this very moment."

"Well!" Her brother-in-law, who had paused in the middle of his breakfast to stare at her, now passed his cup up to be replenished, and leaning back in his chair waited for more. "I hope you mean to give us the full particulars," he said.

"I was walking along that little path — the one across the fields, you know," Annette began, "when I heard a little splashing in the creek, and I tiptoed over and pushed the willows aside and — and there was the most exquisite little girl I think I ever saw, and she was taking a morning bath."

"Why, Annette!" her sister exclaimed, her cheeks growing faintly pink.

Annette nodded. "You never saw anything so pretty. Of course she thought she was miles away from any one — the willows made a close screen all about the pool, and the water was quite dark except where the sun shimmered on it, and she — well, I never saw anything love-

lier. It was like surprising a little bird having a bath all alone. She came out presently and dressed on the bank. I know it was awful of me — I know I should have come away, but I could n't help it — it was all so pretty and innocent. And besides, I did n't quite feel as though she were real. I felt as though I 'd gone back thousands of years to the dawn of things."

"Did n't she see you?"

"Yes, after a time, she did."

"And what did she say?"

"Well," Annette admitted, "she was extremely angry; she said, 'My lands! how long have you been standing there?'"

Gerald laughed explosively.

"Well, really, I don't blame her," he cried.

"She gave me a regular scolding, then, and, of course, I deserved it; it was outrageous of me. But I apologized, and at last, when I told her how old I was, she seemed somewhat pacified."

"How old is she?"

"Why, I don't know exactly. Sixteen or seventeen — possibly eighteen, I should say."

"And what happened next?" her sister questioned.

"Well, I asked her questions and she evidently has run away from home — in fact, she told me as much. She said her mother was dead, and her father had treated her very badly, and tried to force her to marry a man much older than herself whom she cared nothing for, and when she refused she said her father knocked her dead for a while — what *did* she mean by that, Jerry?"

"Oh, knocked her unconscious, I suppose. They always say 'round here they're dead if they're stunned."

"But how perfectly outrageous — what an abominable man!" Mrs. Crenshaw cried.

"Exactly," said Annette; "and so you see she ran away."

"Where did she come from?"

"Why, I could n't just make out, but from somewhere in the mountains to the north — her own words were, 'I come from off Freedom Ridge.' Do you know where that is?"

Crenshaw shook his head. "Never heard of it," he answered. "But all the ridges have names, you know, and it's impossible to keep

up with any but just those of one's own vicinity. Did she tell you her name?"

"Why, that was rather curious; she seemed confused about her name. She said it was Lindy, and when I asked her what the rest of it was, she did n't seem to know, but she said her father's name was Stillwater, and finally, I think, I made her understand that of course her name must be Linda Stillwater."

"Well, how very extraordinary!" Mrs. Crenshaw cried. "Do you mean to say she's been just tramping through the woods all alone?"

"Yes, that appears to be just what she's been doing."

"Just think of it, Jerry, — a girl like that! I wonder when she started. Has she any idea where she's going?" Mrs. Crenshaw's voice was warm and sympathetic now.

"No; she said she was just traveling along. I think she's been tramping for three or four days."

"Well, I wonder what we ought to do." And Mrs. Crenshaw looked a little helplessly at her husband.

"Why, find out her post-office address, and

communicate with her people, I suppose," he said.

"And have that beast of a father get hold of her again!" his wife cried.

"Well, you can't harbor a runaway, you know, — and, besides, she may not be telling the truth about her father."

"Oh, yes, she is!" Annette cut in quickly. "I'm sure she is — she is truth itself." She rose slowly and put her hand on the back of her chair. "I am going to make myself responsible for her, and have her educated," she said simply.

Her sister and brother-in-law stared at her for one astounded moment, then —

"Oh, Annette! You're *not!*" her sister cried.

And "Great Heavens, Annette! I never heard such nonsense!" Crenshaw exclaimed. "Why, you know absolutely nothing about the girl."

"I know nothing really about a wild columbine, or a trillium, except that it is beautiful, and absolutely satisfying in every way, and this child has just the same effect on me."

"Well, you do have the wildest ideas!" Mrs. Crenshaw said, struggling to keep the irritation out of her voice.

Annette laughed, but her fine eyes began to kindle.

"I know I do seem wild to you and to most of my acquaintances, Emmy dear," she said, "but when I seem the wildest to other people is just the time when I seem the sanest to myself. Of course, I don't expect you to feel about this little creature out of the mountains as I do; — why to me she is romance and poetry and music, and the embodiment of everything that is beautiful. She touches something that is deep and real in me. And yet with it all she is the most absolutely simple and natural little thing that I ever saw." She flushed faintly, a little defiant, a little embarrassed by the depths of her emotion. "But, of course," she added a trifle breathlessly, — "of course, I don't expect her to make the same impression on you."

"Well, I'm thankful you don't," her sister said.

"But, at any rate, you'll let me bring her in and show her to you?" Annette pursued.

"Oh, yes, of course I want to see her," the other assented, and Annette went off to the kitchen in search of Linda.

"Really, Emmy," Mr. Crenshaw seized the opportunity to say sharply, "I hope you're not going to let Annette do anything so perfectly absurd."

"My dear! When did I or any one else ever prevent Annette from doing anything in the round world she had made up her mind to do? When a woman is twenty-eight and has an income of her own, she is free to do almost anything she pleases."

Mr. Crenshaw drummed irritably on the table.

"Some women ought n't to have incomes of their own!" he growled; adding still lower as Annette was heard returning, "Deliver me, anyway, from the single woman who writes!"

"Well, at any rate, Jerry," Annette said sweetly, entering at the moment, "you rescued Emmy from being a single woman who wrote. Did she ever tell you she used to write verses before she was married? Yes, and they were published, too, — three of them in 'The Churchman,' and one about a kitten in 'Our Dumb Animals.'"

"Oh, Annette!" her sister pleaded, flushing all over her soft, plump face.

Mr. Crenshaw looked uncomfortable and mumbled, "I beg your pardon, Annette."

"Here is Linda," Annette continued serenely.

The girl had entered with Miss Whittemore and now stood regarding the two strangers with absolute freedom from self-consciousness.

"How do you do," Mrs. Crenshaw ventured, a trifle nervous under the other's straight, clear gaze.

"Howdy," Linda responded.

"Won't you sit down? I — we want to talk to you. Don't go, Gerald, please," Mrs. Crenshaw added, detecting a desire on her husband's part to slip out of an embarrassing situation.

A look of amusement played faintly about the corners of Annette's mouth, but Linda was wholly unconscious of there being any reason for either embarrassment or amusement. She accepted the chair offered her in silence, yet with a little faint smile that saved her silence from ungraciousness, and, having seated herself, she looked about the room with a frank, delighted curiosity.

"Well, *ain't* this er pretty room!" she cried

at length. "It's jist ther prettiest place I ever did see!"

The stiffness of Mrs. Crenshaw's embarrassment relaxed a little at the evident genuineness of the remark.

"I'm glad you like it," she said, making the conventional reply to a compliment.

"Do you eat here?" Linda pursued in surprise, regarding the breakfast table. "Why don't you all eat in the kitchen?"

Silence followed. Faced by this entirely new question, Mrs. Crenshaw found it difficult to explain just why they did not have their meals in the kitchen. When she did speak it was to say firmly again, "No, Gerald, please don't go yet."

The amusement on Annette's face deepened.

"I never seed folks that had two places to eat at," Linda continued ingenuously. "Except, er course, no white person would eat with er nigger. But where I come from ther folks jist eats in ther kitchen."

"Well, you see," Annette came to the rescue, "people who come from different parts of the world have different ways of doing things."

"Well, I reckon that's true," Linda assented in her softly tolerant voice. She looked across at Mr. Crenshaw. "Does a old white cow with a bell belong to you?" she inquired.

"Why, yes — yes, I have a white cow."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I stole some of her milk this mornin'. I was mighty hungry an' I jist naturally had to have somepum. If you'll tell me how much ther milk's worth, I'll be glad ter pay yer fer it."

She put her hand inside her dress and drew out the little tobacco bag, facing them all in perfect trustfulness, and perfect confidence in her little store of money.

The amusement vanished from Annette's face, and in its place she felt a sudden ache in her throat.

"Oh, nonsense!" Crenshaw said hastily; "of course, you were welcome to the milk."

Linda smiled; that exquisite slow smile of hers that lighted her eyes and illumined her whole face. "I'm much erbliged," she said.

"Did you get something more to eat in the kit — I mean," — Mrs. Crenshaw hastily corrected herself, not daring again to approach the

difficult question of eating in the kitchen,—"did the cook give you some breakfast?"

"Yes, marm — that lady give me plenty, an'" — again she smiled engagingly — "I certainly *was* glad to git it."

A rather awkward pause followed, and again Annette found herself with that delighted secret desire to laugh.

"My sister says you've been tramping," Mrs. Crenshaw said, finally mustering her courage. "Where did you come from?"

"From off Freedom Ridge."

"Where is that? Do you know what your post-office is?" Mr. Crenshaw asked.

"Oh, yes, sir, er course I know."

There was a little further silence.

"Was you after writin' to my folks?" Linda said presently.

"I had some thought of doing so," he admitted.

Linda considered a few moments. "Well, I reckon you kin if you want," she said at length. "But ther ain't no danger of ther wantin' me back, an' I would n't go if they did. My father's name is George Stillwater, an' his post-

office is Linden. I don't reckon he'll answer. I ain't nothin' ter him, an' he ain't nothin' ter me no more."

"How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen, goin' on eighteen."

"Well, I am not sure about it, not being a lawyer," Mr. Crenshaw said, "but I imagine your father can compel you to return by law if he so desires."

Linda looked at him, not defiantly but with assured finality.

"You, ner ther law, ner nobody else can make me go back to him," she said simply.

"You don't know, my girl, what the law can do," Mr. Crenshaw returned with some asperity.

Linda made no response. She sat at ease, her brown hands clasped lightly in her lap, and regarded him quietly.

Crenshaw fidgeted with the things upon the table, crumbling up some bits of bread in front of him.

"Of course," Annette hastened to say, "no one will make you go back to your father if he treats you badly."

"But you know you can't go on tramping

through the country like this?" her brother-in-law contributed.

"Why can't I?"

"Because you can't, of course, you can't. — It is n't right."

"Why, I ain't doin' no harm," Linda said in surprise.

"No, of course, it is n't wrong exactly," Mrs. Crenshaw attempted to elucidate, "but" —she broke off looking rather helplessly at her husband.

"Of course, you can't go on doing it," he repeated positively.

"I kin if I want," she said mildly.

"No, you can't either, for I shan't allow it," he returned, with increasing irritation.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Why, you ain't got no right over me," she said.

"What about that man who wanted to marry you? Don't you suppose he will try to find you?" Annette interposed quickly.

Linda shook her head.

"He may — but I don't reckon he will. You see he's got er wife already."

"Got a wife!" Mrs. Crenshaw cried.

"Yes, marm. She come after him ther day I left. That was ther reason I come away."

"He had a wife all the time he wanted to marry you?" Annette cried.

Linda stared out of the window, a vivid color in her cheeks. She nodded her head slowly at length and said, as though speaking to herself.

"Yes, he hed er wife all ther time."

"And, of course, nobody knew it?"

"Not at first they did n't. You see, he come up on Freedom Ridge to work in ther sawmill, — he's er master sawyer, an' a mighty smart worker on a log job, — but nobody did n't know nothin' erbout him er where he come from."

There was a constrained pause at this revelation, broken at length by Mrs. Crenshaw. "Well, Linda," she said, "we want you to stay with us for the present; — we don't like to think of you tramping all alone through the country — will you stay?"

Mrs. Crenshaw's tone was very kind and very pleasant, and after a moment's consideration Linda yielded.

"Why, I'd be powerful glad to stay here fer er spell. A feller I seed yesterday said I ought n't

ter keep on trampin' like this through ther country. He wanted ter put me at school with some ladies he knowed."

"Why, who was that?" Annette asked.

"I dunno; I never seed him afore. But he said he come from Boston."

"From Boston!" Mrs. Crenshaw exclaimed. "Why, Annette, who could that have been?"

"Perhaps it was old Mr. Wingate," her husband suggested. "I heard he was coming down here to see about that big tract of timber of his — over in The Flats, you know. Was he an old man?"

"Well, he was n't so very young; he said he was twenty-nine goin' on thirty. But er course that ain't *real* old."

"Hardly," Mrs. Crenshaw smiled.

"It could n't have been old Wingate, then; it might have been some one in his party, though," her husband remarked.

"I come from Boston," Annette said to Linda.

"You do? Well, I reckon it must be er mighty fine place. That feller said the people there all thought a heap of it."

Annette laughed.

"Then you will stay for the present?" Mrs. Crenshaw persisted.

"Oh, yes, marm, I'll be glad to stay, —only, of course, I got ter work for my board."

"Very well, you can help Mary with the housework; come with me, and I'll show you about it now."

Annette and Mr. Crenshaw were left alone.

"Well, she's had a history has n't she?" Annette ventured. She did not choose to ask her rather critical brother-in-law what he thought of Linda.

"Yes, if it's true."

"I know it's true."

"Well I shall write to the father and find out."

"I hope you did n't mind my taking the liberty of bringing her to the house, Jerry?"

"Oh, no," he answered, "of course not. It was the only thing to be done until we have found her people."

Annette did not speak at once. She clasped her hands in front of her on the table. They were long, slender hands, and were full of character, but rather ineffectual. "Yes," she said, nodding her head quietly, "yes, I shall look

after her and educate her. She's only seventeen, and dear knows that 's young enough to learn a great deal."

"Well, I think you are extremely foolish," Gerald Crenshaw said, with a return of his irritability. "But, of course, you know your own business."

"I do in this, Jerry. I don't usually know what I want, but I've known I wanted Linda from the very first moment I set eyes on her. I've never in all my life seen any one who made the same impression on me that little thing does. However," she added with a little laugh, "it's quite possible she won't accept my offer. One can see she's an independent little person."

"That's true," her brother returned hopefully. "Perhaps she won't."

CHAPTER XII

"Well, Annette, here's the answer to my letter to Linda's father at last," Mr. Crenshaw said. It was ten days after Linda's arrival at the Crenshaw farm. Annette, her sister, and brother-in-law were all seated in deep porch chairs looking over the noon mail which had just arrived.

"The old man seems as indifferent as Linda said he would be," Crenshaw added.

Annette took the limp and soiled sheet of blue-lined paper that he held out to her and with some difficulty read the penciled scrawl aloud: —

Mr. Crenshaw:

Dear Friend: Yer letter come to hand Satidy. Mr. Crenshaw I don't know nothin' at all about you ner why you should take a hand in my business. Lindy is nothin' ter me no more. I allus tried ter act right by her, but she was never no 'count. Mr. Crenshaw you need n't to be

wantin' me ter take her back fer I never will. I dunno what lies she has tole you, but I tell you ther straight truth. She need n't never expect ter come back here fer she ain't wanted.

Yours ter command,

GEORGE STILLWATER.

When she had finished, Annette held the paper a little while between her fingers and did not speak at once.

"What a beast that man must be!" Mrs. Crenshaw commented. "Fancy writing such a letter about his own daughter! It does n't seem possible that such a man can be Linda's father. I wonder what the mother was like — you need n't tell me Linda has n't got some good blood in her veins from somewhere."

"Oh, blood!" Annette said impatiently. "Why must blood be made to account for everything? I don't believe Linda has a drop better blood in her veins than any of the mountain people hereabouts — and I'm glad to think she has n't. I'm glad she has n't anything to thank her ancestors for — she is what she is of herself, and not of any possibly genteel ancestry."

"Why will you talk that way, Annette?" her sister said in gentle distress. "To hear you one would think you had n't any ancestors of your own, and yet in your heart of hearts you know very well you're proud of your family."

"Well, if I am, it's a pride I'm ashamed of."

"O-ho!" her brother-in-law jeered. "So that's the way the lady feels! And yet I seem to remember hearing you, that winter you stayed with us in Richmond, tell some girl who said that her ancestor married George Washington, that *your* ancestor refused to marry him because his family was n't good enough for her!"

Annette flushed and laughed guiltily. "My dear Jerry, you may have heard me say any ridiculous thing that winter. I had to climb so many family trees that it's no wonder I lost my balance a little."

"Of course you have to climb family trees, as you put it, in Virginia. We have the best blood in America there and naturally we're proud of it," Gerald replied, at once on the defence for his native State.

"Oh, my dear, not a bit better than we have in Massachusetts," his wife cried.

Annette laughed as she rose. "Well, when you two have found out where the best blood — the very best, you understand — in the country is to be found, just let me know, please. I have a strong belief that precious little of the so-called best blood ever came to America, but that the really best — the pioneer blood that had some push and freshness and hardihood — did come. In the meantime," she added, "I am going to find Linda."

"Wait a minute, Annette," her sister said hastily. "Just wait a minute, please. What are you going to say to Linda?"

"I am going to say what I made up my mind to say to her the very first time I ever saw her," Annette returned steadily.

"And that is —?"

"That I want her to come and live with me — that I want her very much, indeed."

"Have you considered what your sister Mary will say to this, Annette?" Mr. Crenshaw demanded heavily.

"I have, Jerry, and I believe my sister Mary will be good enough to tolerate it, as she tolerates most of my vagaries. And, anyway, it

is n't what I do, so much as what I *don't* do that disturbs Mary."

"Well —" her brother-in-law began with impatience. But in the end he did not finish his sentence, and after slapping his riding-boots with his crop for a few moments he got up with a shrug of his shoulders, "Well, I'm off to the upper place to have a look at the peaches," he said, and took his departure, leaving the situation discreetly to his wife.

"Gerald is very much against this idea of yours," Mrs. Crenshaw said when he had gone.

"Are you?" Annette demanded.

"No — I don't think I'm as much opposed to it as he is."

"Then, dear angel sister, why do you bother? After all, it will be your family she'll be adopted into and not his. It will be Whittemores, not Crenshaws, who will have to associate with her —or not associate, as they make up their minds on the matter, and she will be all the distance away from Gerald that Boston is from Richmond."

"I wish you were n't quite so defiant about it," the other sighed.

"But Emmy dear, I should think you'd be glad that at last I cared enough about something to be defiant. Are n't you and Mary always disturbed over the aimlessness of my existence? — over the fact that I don't seem to care about anything on earth except my writing — which is certainly unfortunate, because nobody else on earth cares anything about it? You know as well as I do that nothing worries Mary so much as having me just drifting about the house with my hands behind my back; — I think she'll be pleased that I've been sure enough of myself for once to unclasp my hands and reach out and grab this little child out of the mountains. And then, too," she added with a hint of wistfulness, "I do think, for all her disapproval, Mary *is* fond of me."

"Oh, Annette, of course she's fond of you! We both are — nobody can take the place of our little sister," Mrs. Crenshaw said affectionately. "Well —" Like her husband she did not finish her sentence, but there was more consent implied in her "well" than there had been in his.

Annette found Linda down by the creek-side washing clothes. She had declined the con-

veniences of Mrs. Crenshaw's well-equipped laundry with its modern improvements, and had carried all her paraphernalia out of doors.

"I never heerd of folks washin' in ther house in summer-time, especially when ther's sech a chanst er water in ther crick, an' when it's such er pretty day," she had declared.

When Annette caught sight of her she paused a moment involuntarily to watch her. The girl's beautiful effortless movements always gave her keen pleasure.

It was a splendid, windy day of early summer. A vivid day full of color and motion. Close to the creek, Linda had kindled a little fire on which to heat water, and the wind blew the blaze out in sharp, red tongues, and swirled the blue smoke here and there. The little scene was half in sunlight and half in the effulgent green shadowed light from the trees. As Annette watched, Linda drew a red calico skirt from the white suds of her tub, and wrung it out. As her supple hands twisted and folded the garment the muscles of her wrists responded with perfect, efficient grace. All at once, with a quick swirl, she shook the skirt out to its full length,

and of a sudden a gust of wind caught her and it in a small fury; tossing a silver shower of drops into the sunlight, rioting through the girl's hair and almost snatching the garment from her. It swept past in a moment and Linda stepped over and spread the skirt out to the sunlight on a near-by thornbush.

Annette gave a little sigh of pleasure. The whole scene was so beautiful in its simplicity, its outdoor coloring, and in the girl's absolute grace.

"That was lovely, Linda," she cried, almost in spite of herself.

"What's lovely?" Linda demanded.

"Why, the way you do your washing."

Linda flung back her head with a ripple of surprised laughter. "Well, I *never* heerd just plain washin' called lovely before!" she cried. "Don't they do it that way up in Boston?"

"I don't think I ever watched any one washing before, but I know one thing, they don't do it out in the open air under the trees up there."

Linda leaned back against her tub in an easy, relaxed posture.

"An' I reckon you ain't never washed clothes yerself in all yer life?"

"No, I never have," Annette confessed.

"Well, don't that seem odd?" Linda ruminated. "An' I heerd you say the other day that you could n't cook neither."

"No, nor cook."

"An' yit yer twenty-eight years old! I think er person misses er heap of enjoyment when they don't know how to do nothin' with their hands. You an' me certainly have had a different kind er raisin', ain't we?"

"Yes, I suppose we have," Annette admitted. "But that need n't make any difference in our liking one another, need it?" she added with a little rush of eagerness in her voice.

"Why, er course it need n't," Linda said. "Them 's jist outside things, an' I reckon what you really are is inside, ain't it?"

"I 'm sure it is," Annette assented.

There was a little pause. Linda stared away into the deep blue of the sky beyond the trees.

"What is er hospital?" she asked abruptly at length.

"A hospital?" Annette answered in surprise. "Why it's a place where sick people are taken care of. Where they have nurses and doctors, you know."

"Do they take just any person in?"

"Why, some hospitals take only certain kinds of diseases, but others take almost any kind."

"I heerd some one say there was a good hospital at Pritchard's Junction — that ain't so very far from here, is it?"

"Well, it's between forty and fifty miles, I think; — but why are you interested in hospitals?"

"Oh, I was jist wonderin' erbout 'em," Linda said; adding, "there certainly is er heap er things I don't know nothin' erbout, ain't there?"

"Linda," said Annette, "my brother has had a letter from Mr. Stillwater — from your father."

Linda turned away sharply, and, taking up a fresh garment from her tub, spread it upon her washboard and began soaping it elaborately.

"What did ther letter say?" she asked; and as Annette did not reply at once she added, "Oh, yer need n't try ter soften it down for me; I know mighty well what kind of a man my father is."

"He says you can't come home," Annette said reluctantly.

"He says that because he knows mighty well I never would go home to him! Does he say anything erbout the baby, er any of the other children?"

"No, not a word."

Linda turned back to her washing.

"An' I reckon he did n't say nothin' erbout Mr. Decker?" she said at length, and her usually steady hands shook a little over their work.

"Mr. Decker? No; who is he?"

"He's ther feller — that wanted ter marry me."

"No, there's nothing in it about him."

"Linda," Annette burst forth after a moment, "I'm glad the letter said what it did, because now you are quite free, and I want you — I want you to come and live with me, and be just like my little sister. Oh, Linda!

will you come? I want you very much," she pleaded.

Linda looked at her with wide, astonished eyes.

"You want *me?*" she cried.

"Yes, I want you — I want you dreadfully."

"But I ain't nothin' — I jist ain't nothin' ter nobody any more — I don't see why you would want *me*."

"But I do — I want you very much, and I'll take you home with me, and abroad, and you shall study about all the things you are interested in."

Linda averted her face, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes. "Yer — mighty good," she said softly.

"And you will come?"

The girl looked at her a long time, but in the end she shook her head slowly.

"I can't," she said.

"Oh, Linda! Why not?"

"Because — because I got other things ter do."

"What other things?"

Linda was silent a long time.

"Can't you tell me what the things are you want to do, Linda?" Annette asked.

But the girl shook her head, still staring with sombre, unseeing eyes straight in front of her.

"No," she said; "no, I can't tell. It ain't nobody's business but jist my own. I'd like ter tell you all erbout it — but some way it's jist shut up tight inside of me an' I can't tell it ter nobody. An' — I ain't told you everything — you 've got a wrong idea erbout me — but I did n't *mean* ter fool you."

Annette stood before her baffled and distressed.

"I am sorry," she said at length. "I am so sorry, Linda." She looked at the other's lovely, dark face, and realized with a sudden acute sharpness that the girl was facing something that was terrible. She put her arm about her quickly and drew her close.

"Are you sure you can't tell me all about it?" she asked softly.

For a moment Linda dropped her head against the other's shoulder, and Annette realized that she was crying. But almost directly she drew

herself away, and pushed her hair back from her face with a little determined gesture.

"Oh, I ought n't ter act that away," she cried.

"Can't you tell me, Linda?" Annette persisted gently.

"No,—no, I can't," the girl answered, with a little shake of her head.

Annette regarded her with troubled eyes for some time. "Well, listen to me," she said at last. "I am going North next week, and if there is ever anything I can do for you, or if you ever change your mind, I want you to let me know —or come straight to me. This is my address," she added, taking a card from a chatelaine bag at her belt.

"Yer mighty good," Linda said, and there was a little quiver in her voice as there had been before. She put her hands up and covered her face with them. But only for a moment; then she dropped them and turned resolutely back to her work. And Annette knew instinctively that she wished to be alone, and turning made her way sadly back to the house.

The next morning Linda was gone. Flown like a little wild bird. On her pillow was pinned

a scrap of paper, together with a tattered dollar bill.

"You all been mighty good ter me," the paper read, "and I certainly do thank you. I got to go. Please you all don't try ter foller me.

"LINDA.

"P. S. I leave this dollar in case I ain't worked out all of my bord."

CHAPTER XIII

Linda lay very still in her hospital bed, and stared away out of the window at the swirls of clouds wind-swept through a vivid blue winter sky. She was engulfed in an enormous still peace. Her whole body, exquisitely, trustfully relaxed, gave itself in every muscle unreservedly to absolute repose. Beside her was her child, born two days before, and her whole being thrilled in response to the touch of its small body.

After she had stolen away in the early morning from the Crenshaws' house, she had tramped three days through the country until she came to Pritchard Junction, and found the hospital that Annette had spoken of. Here she told her whole story to the matron, and the latter had been touched and had believed her, and had taken her in, allowing her to do light work through the summer for her board, and had looked after her kindly when her time had come.

As Linda lay there in that ineffable peace,

watching the clouds, she seemed to be entering into a larger self, to be opening out like a flower coming into bloom. For all her tranquillity, she was more intensely alive than she had ever been in all her life before. Though her body was still, her emotions were poignantly awake. Vivid pictures out of the past marched through her mind in sharp procession. She did not meditate upon them; she felt and saw them. She saw herself a little girl playing about on Freedom Ridge; dropping corn in the brown fields of spring with the perfume of fresh-turned earth in her nostrils and the moist feel of it under her bare feet, or running across shining, unbroken stretches of snow in the winter. Then her older self dancing through the woods with the flower book, when the doors into a wider life had creaked open a little way. All the scenes thereafter went by on winged feet. She felt the sting of her father's blow upon her face, and the leap of her own anger. She smelt the damp, cool woods of late afternoon when she and Armstrong Decker had faced each other across the great stone. Then came the long drive home from Linden, when the enormous arch of sky had

changed from flaming sunset to gray, and then to deep, dark blue. She heard dreamily, as she had heard it then, the horses drinking at the ford, and the water washing through the wheels of their wagon. Next she seemed to look up and see that strange, hard-featured woman in her doorway and to hear her say that she was Armstrong Decker's wife. And finally, she saw herself crouching close in the undergrowth while Decker swung by her whistling on the road a few paces from her, and all unconscious of the catastrophe awaiting him just a turn of the road away. And all the pictures, with their accompanying emotions, led up to and culminated in the little faint touch of her child's body against her own.

"I was jist a child then — jist nothin' but a child," she whispered to the baby. "But I'm grown up now — I'm a woman — why, I'm your mother, little honey girl."

Her thoughts left the past and strayed away into a little tender by-path where she tried over all the endearments she had ever heard to find a suitable one for her baby. "For honey ain't really good enough for you," she whispered.

"Darlin' is mighty sweet," — Her tongue stumbled a little over the unaccustomed word! "I ain't right used to it yet, but mammy'll learn — an' she's goin' ter give you jist the very best there is in all ther world."

She saw in a sudden poignancy of deeper knowledge the difficult heritage that this little baby would have in the eyes of the world, and a fierce determination leaped within her to fling her mother self between her child and any rough handling of existence. "Mammy'll keep it from havin' a hard time," she promised softly, passionately defying Fate. Her own life had not been an easy one, but the fierceness of her love should win ease for this little girl. With the magnitude of her devotion she would build a new world. And first of all she must begin with herself. She must educate herself — must perfect herself for the great adventure of motherhood. It behooved a mother who would make a perfect life for her child to be deeply and wonderfully perfect herself. The mother of her child could never stoop to anything that was mean or untrue. And suddenly with this desire for perfection her soul reached out of her small, young

body to the greatness of God, who was her Father and the Father of all the world and therefore must understand and help her. "Dear God," she whispered, "you know such a heap erbout bein' a father, show me how to be a good mother — jist ther very best kind of a mother a baby ever had."

The blue sunlit sky flushed faintly to pink, and with her eyes upon the hopeful clouds and her whole being dedicated to this high mission, she fell gently and happily asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

Annette Whittemore kept a journal in which she noted not so much other people's faults as her own. In her own mind she called it "Annette's Journal." "For," she wrote, "I seem to be a weak feminine imitation of Amiel, with all of his self-distrust, and self-questioning; much of his morbidness, but with none, alas! of his greatness."

To most of her friends, and especially to her oldest sister, Miss Mary Whittemore, Annette's life appeared to be deplorably vague and desultory. With the exception of one book, that had achieved a small success among a few fastidious readers, and no success whatever with the general public, a few scraps of fugitive magazine verse, and half a dozen short stories, that never by any chance ended as the reader had hoped they might, her twenty-eight years had nothing to show for themselves. "And yet she was one of the cleverest girls at Miss Peabody's school!" her friends were apt to remark in some

despair. They did not realize that while she appeared to lead an utterly aimless life, her existence was in truth very full of adventure. The record of it, however, showed only in this little secret journal, which no one had ever seen or was ever likely to see; and her adventures were all adventures of thought and emotion rather than of action.

Physically indolent, through some slight defect, perhaps of her nervous system, she was always vaguely conscious of fatigue, so that while her acquaintances rode, skated, tramped, or golfed furiously, she sat quietly at home, reading, or writing, or sometimes, indeed, merely staring abstractedly into the fire. And the things which struck others as extraordinarily important did not strike Annette as important in the very least. While most of those about her were occupied with their minds and bodies, she was concerned with her mind and spirit. It was not necessarily that her life was on a higher plane: it was simply that it was different.

"Other people *must* have the same experiences going on deep inside of them that I have,"

she wrote rather wistfully, "but they never seem to come to the surface. It requires bravery, certainly, to call one's soul one's own, but much more is required to say that one has a soul. Introduce it into conversation, and most people immediately shrink into themselves, as though something at least unpleasant, if not positively disgraceful, had been mentioned. It is as though a little blind, squirming kitten had appeared suddenly upon the hearthrug, and until some one has taken it between thumb and forefinger and removed it, normal conversation cannot go on. These fierce stone walls that we all build about our deeper experiences seem very strange. Why can't such things be discussed in a simple and human manner? And why do so many people become inarticulate, and therefore resentful, the moment conversation drops ever so slightly below the surface of things? And yet, perhaps, after all, I am the one who is wrong. Perhaps I make a mistake in this everlasting feeling after my soul."

Thus Annette puzzled back and forth, "feeling ever of her pulse of thought," as she herself would have said, and arriving nowhere, or at

least at a where that certainly could not be measured by outside accomplishments.

She was seated as she wrote in her own small study in the Whittemore house in Boston. She laid down her pen now, and placing her elbows on her desk, stared out at the gray sky, her fine, thoughtful face resting in her cupped hands. It was a face which, having too little regularity of feature to be handsome, had nevertheless much beauty of expression. It would have been, in repose, perhaps too grave to be attractive, had it not been softened by that hint of wistfulness that was at once unexpected and appealing. In speaking, her eyes were always alight, and her smile was charming.

The desk in front of her was littered with innumerable scraps of manuscripts; the skeleton plot of a novel; suggestions for short stories; a half-outlined idea for a character sketch, and any number of unfinished bits of verse, Annette's propensity for beginning things and not finishing them being another of her characteristics greatly deplored by her friends. "But people don't seem to realize," she wrote in her journal, "that the beginnings of things are much

more exciting than their cut-and-dried completions. When one makes a beginning it is a high adventure, the wings of which may bare one dear knows how far 'beyond the bourne of time and place.' Whereas, when a thing is finished, it is finished — the adventure is over, and there remains of its first glory and romance only the dull Philistine satisfaction of something accomplished, something done. And, moreover, when it is finished it always falls infinitely short of the golden promise of its beginning."

Without, it was a heavy March day devoid of color. A skim of snow had fallen during the night, and some patches of it still lay here and there on the streets and small grass-plots, though for the most part it had been melted by the drizzle of sleet and rain that had come later. It was a day made up of blacks and browns, of whites and grays. Gray, heavy sky over the whole city, gray fog in the distant vistas of the streets. Sodden white spots of snow with brown footprints and wheel-tracks across them. Black tree-trunks and bare, black branches against the sky. The eye longed for some vivacity of color — a flash of yellow sunlight and blue sky;

the flicker of green leaves; or even the glimpse of a child's red hat. It was March, but there was as yet no hint of spring in the air, only a feeling of extreme weariness over the prolongation of the winter.

As Annette stared out, she sighed slightly, the depression of the weather closing upon her. She was nearing the end of a long winter — a winter which her sister, Miss Mary Whittemore, who was interested in a great number of philanthropies, had found very full of zest and achievement, but which Annette was forced to admit, ruefully, had brought her little of note. With an idle pen she drew grotesque gargoyle faces on her blotter, as she tried to formulate some plan for the approaching summer. "If I go back to West Virginia," she mused, "there's always the chance of my running across Linda again."

The experience of the spring before, when Linda Stillwater had suddenly stepped out of the woods into Annette's life, and as suddenly disappeared again, had left an ineffaceable impression upon her mind. All through the following winter she had treasured vivid pictures of Linda's dark, child face; of her slender body,

and of her delicate, swift motions. "I have never found any one who made the impression upon me that that strange child did," she confided to her journal. "And yet I do not even now know what there was about her that made her for me so different from all the world. When I say it was her absolute simplicity, or honesty, or naturalness, I say in part what it was, but it was something else much more — a part of something bigger that I do not understand. Perhaps it was —"

Here in her writing she was interrupted by the entrance of a maid bearing a visiting-card. Annette gave a little sigh of vexation as she laid down her pen, but when she read "Miss Louisa French" on the card, her face cleared and she rose with a pleased eagerness.

Miss French had been a school-friend of Annette's mother who was dead. Therefore, when she came to call, owing to the difference in their ages, it was always something of a state occasion to which they both paid delicate tribute, an appreciation of the little events of life being a gift that they had in common.

"You meet old ladies just right, Annette,"

Miss Louisa said, as, after the first greeting, the girl took her furs, and saw that she had a footstool. "We like a little acknowledgment that we have traveled some distance on the road, but we don't want to have the fact thrust upon us at every turn. Moreover, you achieve an air of leisure that we old folks find very restful."

"Ah, but it's just my air of leisure that my friends object to," Annette said, smiling, as she settled her long figure in a chair on the opposite side of the hearth. "It's the unforgivable sin these days — Mary deplores it in me all the time."

"Mary — well —" Miss French began, but left the "well" unfinished. She had a great regard for Miss Mary Whittemore, and would have accepted her opinion on any philanthropic matter with unquestioning faith, but she did not find her as interesting as Annette.

"Have you and Mary decided upon your summer plans yet?" she asked presently, feeling, perhaps, that as Miss Mary's name had appeared, she should be paid the tribute of some inclusion in the conversation.

"Mary has hers all made. She always takes

the last week in February for making up her mind about the summer. She'll be at Nahant, of course, for most of the time, but she's going down to Emmy and Jerry for August. She's going to read a paper sometime, somewhere, on the mountain whites of the South, and she wants to study them a little at first hand in West Virginia."

"And what about you?" Miss French asked.

"Well, I shall go South, too, but it will be in May when all the woods are in bloom with dogwood and redbud, and azalea, and crab-apples, and the laurel just beginning. Oh, it's lovely then! and besides, I want to try and find Linda, and somehow I have a foolish feeling that there's more chance of finding her at that time than at any other — she seems to belong to the spring. You remember my telling you about her?"

"Of course — she was that little child of Nature that you found taking a bath in a wayside brook. But suppose you did find her, Annette, what could you do with her?"

"Well — well, for one thing, I could love her a great deal. You know I wanted to adopt

her and have her educated. Of course, Emmy and Jerry thought it was a perfectly wild idea. But the worst of it was that Linda herself declined to come. I don't know why, but I feel she had some deep reason for not coming. The next day, you know, she disappeared, and we never saw her again. I never saw any one who so owned herself, if you know what I mean. I feel sure I could never have changed her in anything she had made up her mind to do — and I should n't have tried, I should have felt I had no right to."

There was a little pause between them, while they both stared thoughtfully into the fire. When Miss French spoke, it was to change the subject rather abruptly.

"What are you writing now?" she inquired.

"Oh — nothing," Annette answered rather forlornly.

"You have n't given it up!" the other cried quickly.

"Oh, no, I shall never give it up. It may give me up some day, but as long as it stays, I suppose I shall continue to give it my best time and attention. When I say I am writing nothing,

I really mean that I am finishing nothing. I begin any number of things, but their endings go trailing off into the dark of my mind and are as difficult to find as the ends of rainbows."

"Well, like the rainbows, when you do find the ends to your things there's a pot of gold there for your friends. Look at 'Vida,'" Miss French said affectionately.

"Vida" was the name of Annette's one book. The girl's face was suddenly transformed and softened. "Oh, you *are* good to remember!" she cried.

There followed another little silence. The fire whispered softly upon the hearth between them. Its bright eye had become the centre of the room now, keeping at bay the approaching shadows of twilight. In the still room, with its fire, its perfume of spring flowers, and the presence of the placid old woman, was peace, and both Miss French and Annette had the leisure to savor it. But suddenly the stillness was broken by an unaccountable knocking.

"Why —" Annette exclaimed, straightening up. She and Miss French gazed a moment at

one another in questioning surprise, and again the knocking came, not loud, but insistent.

"Why, how queer!" Annette said. "Some one is knocking at the front door — the bell must be out of order. There! Susan has heard them now."

She and Miss French waited with keyed attention, their eyes questioning one another as they listened to the maid go down the hall, and heard her open the door. There followed a little low murmur of conversation, and then, suddenly, a voice, said, "Howdy," softly, and a slender figure appeared in the drawing-room doorway, with Susan's surprised face in the background.

"*Linda!*" Annette cried; "*Linda!*"

She was too astonished to move, and for a moment the two faced each other in silence, the length of the wide, luxurious room between them. There were heavy, dull-blue hangings at the doorway, and Linda stood against them, a delicate, slight figure, head up, and deep eyes looking straight at Annette. She was dressed in a little shabby blue suit, and she had swept off the quaint straw hat that she wore.

"I 'lowed I'd come to you after all, ef you still want me," she said in her slow, soft voice. There was something at once aloof and appealing in the words, and she stood still waiting in the doorway.

Annette gave a little laugh of excitement that was half a sob, and went swiftly down the room, with outstretched eager hands.

"Oh, Lindy! Of *course* I want you! Of course I do!" she cried, and put her arms tight about the girl.

She said after a moment to Miss French, her face lighted by excitement, and a little quiver in her voice, "It's Lindy — you know, I was just telling you about her."

Miss French smiled, and put out her hand. "How do you do, my dear," she said.

Linda placed her work-hardened little hand in the other's large white one with absolute confidence. "Howdy," she responded. She stood a moment in silence, looking deep into the old woman's face with her clear, direct gaze.

In the world Miss French was regarded as a great lady in the conventional sense of the

phrase, but her friends knew that below the conventional surface was a very fine and brave human being, one who had played the game of life zestfully, uncompromisingly, honestly, as it concerned herself; tenderly, sympathetically, broadly, where others were concerned. Linda saw nothing of the society side of Miss French, it was a side of life that she knew nothing about, but as she withdrew her hand, she inclined her head in a little unconscious tribute.

"I reckon yer a mighty fine old woman," she said simply.

And under her clear scrutiny Miss French colored with a quick, surprised pleasure.

"I want to be er fine woman, too!" Linda cried suddenly, passionately, her eyes fixed on Miss French. "Oh, do yer reckon I kin be?" She turned eagerly to Annette. "I come up ter you," she said, "because you said you'd give me er education, an' would learn me things — an' that's what I want — I want ter learn, an' I want ter be fine an' good, too, — an' I'm goin' ter be— ef God helps me, I'm goin' ter learn!"

Suddenly, forgetful of the others, she sank down on her knees on the hearth, shivering a

little, and holding out her eager, cold hands that had had no gloves on them to the warmth of the blaze.

In her shabby, scant suit which showed the delicate, almost childlike lines of her figure, she looked extraordinarily young, yet for all her youth, she was crowned with the distinction of a passionate dedication.

"I just want ter be the kind of er woman a baby would be proud ter have fer its mother," she said softly; "an' — an' I'm goin' ter be, ef God helps me!"

CHAPTER XV

In the carrying out of her promise to Linda of an education, Annette took her abroad almost immediately, and there they remained traveling and studying for over a year and a half. The end of that time, however, saw them established in Boston, Annette leading her usual desultory life, and Linda, after a brief visit in the South to the matron of the hospital at Pritchard's Junction, pursuing her studies more furiously than ever, driven, as it were, by some hidden desire which often puzzled Annette.

It was a Friday afternoon, and Fridays were Miss Louisa French's days for being at home. "Come in after the symphony," she was wont to say, but those who really wished to see her were in the habit of dropping in earlier, as later her drawing-room was apt to be crowded, for Miss Louisa had only to announce the hour at which her tea-kettle was expected to boil for her to have any number of friends to drink her tea.

It was December and very cold. Almost all the snatches of conversation overheard in the streets began with "Is n't it *cold* — this is a real Boston winter at last!"

The river was frozen over, and from Miss French's upstairs drawing-room one looked across the gray expanse of ice, dotted all over with flying skaters, and sudden white-winged ice-boats, to the great piers of the bridge standing up sharp and beautiful against a blue-black winter sky.

"Your view is always *so* wonderful!" Mrs. Paxton, one of Miss French's early callers, breathed, her gaze far away upon the bridge. But she brought her eyes back presently to narrow them upon her hostess. "And you *will* tell all your friends about my plans for the dear doggies, won't you, dear Miss French?" she pleaded. "You *do* feel about animals as I do, don't you?" She individualized each word with a sweet caress of tone.

"And how do you feel about animals, Mrs. Paxton?" Everleth French, Miss Louisa's nephew, inquired as he and his Cousin Dorothy Wainwright came over to the tea-table from

the window where they had been watching the skaters.

Mrs. Paxton did not reply at once, but appeared to be rallying all her forces for the definition of her position as she bit delicately into a marmalade sandwich, the while her gaze rested upon the young man before her. He was thin and dark, a trifle below the medium height. Dark, restless eyes, a pointed chin, and rather prominent nose, shadowing a mouth at once sensitive and satirical.

"You ask me what I feel about animals, and I was just trying to formulate my answer, to — to make my theory clear," she said at length. Her voice had a rising inflection, and she lifted her rather prominent blue eyes to his face appealingly, as though she said, "But of course *you* will understand me in spite of the barrier of words."

Everleth, however, chose to ignore the appeal.

"Well, put it into words of one syllable for me," he begged. "I'm only reading in the primer of life as yet."

"The primer of life!" she cried with a little

gust of delicate laughter. "What a delightful expression! I shall remember that — the primer of life!" she repeated, as though stamping it upon her mind.

"Oh, please *don't*," he deprecated hastily.

"Oh, but I do think that's really clever — don't you, Miss French?" Mrs Paxton appealed.

Everleth cast a look of amusement and irritation toward Miss Wainwright, and she, secure in Mrs. Paxton's averted face, gave the faintest possible shrug to her athletic shoulders.

"Clever?" Miss French said vaguely, as though encountering the word for the first time. There was often this vagueness and interrogation in her manner. She seemed frequently faced by the question — "Dear me, what am I doing here, and who in the world are all these people?" It was, however, a manner which conveyed an entirely erroneous impression, for if ever there was a lady whose mind was present tense, and alert, it was Miss Louisa French, and this in spite of her seventy years — or rather, perhaps because of them. Having played her own game of life zestfully through youth and

middle age, old age had now given her the leisure to be interested in her friends' games.

"Dear me, Evvy!" Miss Wainwright laughed. "In the two years that I've been abroad have you become so famous that committees have to be called to decide whether you mean to be clever or not?"

"Heaven forbid," he returned. "Now, do let us get back to the beginning and hear what you feel about animals, Mrs. Paxton."

"Well, I'm afraid I may not make it quite clear," Mrs. Paxton sighed, "but *my* feeling is that human beings should look on animals — at least *domestic* animals — as a sacred trust, you know. We are really, I think, their gods in a sense. — Don't you think that is Maeterlinck's underlying thought in 'The Blue Bird' when the dog always calls the boy Tyltyl, his little god?"

"I don't doubt it," Everleth returned. "There seem to be any number of underlying thoughts of his that have entirely escaped me. Thoughts for daws to peck at," he could not help adding under his breath. "And are you trying to put your theory into practice?" he went on.

"Yes, it was just that I was speaking to Miss

French about," she said eagerly. "It is my great interest. A great deal, of course, *is* being done for animals, but it seems to me one thing has been terribly neglected, and that is recreation for them. Don't you notice how all our best thinkers are coming to believe more and more in *play?* So I am starting a recreation home for animals. Of course it is just a bit of a place to begin with, and at present we can only take kittens. But we have ten of the darlings, and you should see them playing together! Of course kittens *are* naturally frolicsome, but it is *directed* play that we try to teach, with the idea of promoting among them a certain kind of coöperation. And, too, we really feel that it will be interesting, and perhaps valuable from a scientific point of view, to see how far animals can be educated in coöperation. I am so glad you are interested! And, dear Miss French, I wanted to ask you particularly this afternoon if you thought there was any chance of Miss Whittemore's being induced to serve on our board — Miss Mary Whittemore, of course, I mean. She is *so* executive, and if we *could* get her —!" She broke off at this climax of thought.

Miss French, however, shook her head discouragingly. "No, I hardly think there's much chance of that. You see Mary is so occupied with things for people that I doubt if she has any time to give to animals."

"That's *just* the trouble," Mrs. Paxton sighed. "Just so long as people *will* persist in putting human beings first, anything for animals *must* always be handicapped."

"Now, which Miss Whittemore is that, Aunt Louisa?" Miss Wainwright inquired to break this rather depressing conclusion. "Do I know her?"

"Oh, my dear, of course you do!" her aunt returned. "Or if you don't, your Aunt Letitia does — they belong to the same sewing-circle, I believe."

"Are they the Whittemores who have a place at Pride's?"

"Oh, no, not that family at all — their mother was a Winthrop, but Mary Whittemore's mother was a Rutledge."

"Oh, then I know" — the niece made a fresh attempt — "there are two of them, are n't there, and does n't the younger one write? It

seems to me I've sometimes seen things signed Annette Rutledge Whittemore."

"And there's a third sister, but she's married and living somewhere in the South. I think her husband grows peaches — or is it oranges? — anyway, I know they live in Virginia," Mrs. Paxton contributed. And Everleth French added, "And there was a brother in my class, but he died, poor chap." And so the Whittemores' family history was laid bare in a little chorus, even Miss Louisa losing some of her vagueness in the process. Afterwards there was a short pause while every one mentally distinguished the Whittemores whose mother was a Rutledge from those who had a summer place at Pride's. Then conversation broke forth once more in a little ripple.

"Did n't some one tell me that Miss Annette Whittemore has a girl from the South staying with her?" Dorothy Wainwright inquired.

And Mrs. Paxton contributed eagerly, "Oh, now, Miss French, I wanted to ask you about her — who *is* she?" And she settled back in her chair expectantly.

"Her name is Linda Stillwater," Miss French said.

"Stillwater — what a queer name," Miss Wainwright remarked. "I suppose she belongs to one of those old Southern families that one hears so much about."

"Not at all; she is just a little mountain girl with no family at all as far as I know," her aunt returned.

"But how extraordinary!" Miss Wainwright cried.

Everleth French set his cup so abruptly down upon the tea-table that the spoon slipped off and fell to the floor with a tiny silver clatter.

"Oh — so sorry!" he apologized, stooping to pick it up. "Did you ever notice these spoons of Aunt Louisa's?" he added turning to Mrs. Paxton. "They're really quite unique."

"How *charming!*" the lady exclaimed, running easily off the track of the former conversation. "Do tell us their history, Miss French."

"But do tell us first about this Miss Stillwater," Dorothy Wainwright persisted, not to be so easily diverted.

"Yes, I do really want to hear about her," Mrs. Paxton chimed in. "But the spoons are beautiful, Mr. French," she added sweetly as a sop to Everleth; "I *must* hear about them some day."

"Well, I don't know that there's very much to tell about Linda Stillwater," Miss French said, looking vaguely down at her feet which were large and frankly shod in orthopedic shoes, and might well cause her some surprise and question. She might, indeed, ask herself, "Dear me! Can these feet be mine?" "She's just a young girl from West Virginia that Annette ran across when she was visiting her sister and brother-in-law down there — and, by the way it's *West* Virginia and not Virginia where they live, and I'm quite sure he raises peaches and apples, not oranges. Annette took an immense fancy to her the first time she saw her and wanted to adopt her then and there, but for some reason the girl would n't consent at once, but afterwards she found her way up here to Boston to Annette. That was a year and a half ago. Annette took her abroad and they've been studying and traveling until this winter. The

girl seems to have a passion for acquiring an education."

"How perfectly extraordinary!" Miss Wainwright said again, in her clear-cut, inflexible voice.

Everleth French rose rather abruptly, and turning away from the tea-table went over to the window to stare out at the frozen river.

"Well, it is rather unusual, I suppose, for a woman under thirty to adopt a girl of eighteen," Miss French conceded. "But then, you see, Annette *is* unusual, and, besides, this little Linda is a person of most extraordinary charm."

"But a little thing out of the mountains with no education, or family, or anything — why I can't imagine doing such a thing," Miss Wainwright cried.

"No?" her aunt interrogated.

"But surely that Miss Whittemore must be *most* peculiar," the girl persisted.

"Well, yes, she is, I suppose — but, my dear, there were peculiar people in Boston long before Annette Whittemore was born, and there will be, I hope, after she is dead — but there are not

so many as there used to be," Miss French added with a little sigh, for the good old times that were gone.

"But I fail to see why she should be considered peculiar in this instance," Everleth remarked, turning abruptly away from the window. "If you run across a person who attracts you very strongly — as Miss Stillwater seems to have attracted Annette Whittemore — why in the world should n't you grab her if you can? It seems to me that it should be only the normal and right thing to do."

"Oh, Evvy, you're such an idealist!" his cousin laughed. "It seems to me an awful risk — a girl with no education and —"

"Education!" he burst out. "What does the average society girl's education amount to, I should like to know? A smattering of innumerable things, and *nothing* learned thoroughly — and no attempt made to stimulate or prick the imagination. Why Miss Stillwater knows more this minute of the essentials of life, than thousands of so-called educated people — at least she knows enough not to pretend to be anything but what she is."

"Oh, so you know her?" his cousin demanded swiftly.

Everleth looked slightly annoyed. "Yes, I know her," he admitted. "I ran across her with Annette, when I was in Granada last spring, and I'm doing a portrait of her at present," he added.

"Ah," said Miss Wainwright.

"Well, my dear, you'll know her, too, directly," Miss French remarked in a low tone, holding out a couple of visiting-cards which the butler had just presented, and which read, "Miss Annette Rutledge Whittemore," and "Miss Stillwater."

Annette entered the room, and greeted Miss French with the usual quiet, unhurried manner which always distinguished her, and set her a little apart in every gathering.

"And here is Linda," she added.

Linda Stillwater moved forward and took Miss French's outstretched hand and smiled. She did not say anything, but there was nothing constrained or awkward in her silence. It was just a gentle simplicity that demanded no outbreak of words to cover self-consciousness.

Dorothy Wainwright, watching her, was aware of a sharp irritation that a little thing picked up in the back woods by Annette Whittemore should dare to greet her aunt with such naturalness. She was used to seeing a certain elaboration in the manners of those who approached Miss French. "But she is probably too ignorant to realize who Aunt Louisa is," she told herself, as she responded to Annette's greeting, and to Miss French's introduction of Linda.

"Now, how will you have your tea, Annette?" Miss French inquired.

Though not in the least dominated by conventions, she was a person who realized their usefulness in relieving situations, and it is possible that had a desperado suddenly presented a pistol, and demanded her money or her life, her long training would have made her ask him whether he took his tea with lemon or cream, in the hope that the simple formula might relieve the awkwardness of the situation.

"Quite strong, please, and with two lumps," Annette answered.

"And you, Linda? I really don't think I can call you Miss Stillwater," Miss French questioned kindly, with teapot raised.

"I won't take any, thank you," Linda returned, the gentle slowness of her voice just escaping a drawl.

"Linda's never fallen into the afternoon tea habit," Annette explained.

"Don't they go in for tea in the South?" Miss Wainwright inquired.

Linda considered her a moment before she replied, and Dorothy Wainwright was conscious of a vague discomfort, under the scrutiny of those deep, quiet eyes.

"Why, I reckon they have it in some parts of the South," Linda answered at length, "but they don't where I come from."

"How extraordinary," Miss Wainwright commented. "Now, I wonder why they don't —I could n't get on without my tea."

"And I'm sure I could n't either, though it *is* fattening," Mrs. Paxton sighed.

Dorothy Wainwright was in reality very well aware of why the function of afternoon tea was not practiced in Linda's part of the South, but

the girl's serenity provoked her to a slight maliciousness.

Linda, however, merely looked at her with a further deep consideration.

"They don't have it," she explained, "because, where I come from, about the time you all are having tea, the folks I'm used to are starting the fire for supper, and are going out to milk."

"Oh," said Miss Wainwright, embarrassed and taken aback by the other's absolute frankness.

"But why should that astonish you, Miss Wainwright?" Annette turned from Miss French to inquire in level tones, "Surely you are not surprised to discover that afternoon tea is not the custom in most American homes."

"Well, perhaps not in America. I suppose I was thinking more of England," the other murmured, becoming more confused.

Annette laughed pleasantly, "But why cite England when it happens to be a question of America?" she inquired.

Miss Wainwright flushed with annoyance, and did not reply at once.

"Well, it's just whatever a person is used to,

I reckon," Linda's deep voice cut in tolerantly. "I was n't raised to afternoon tea, and it seems odd to me that you all want it; and you've always had it, so it seems just as funny to you for folks not to have it."

"And so, where you come from the people are doing their milking at this time?" Miss French said in her kindly, vague way. "Milking always seems to me very poetical," she added as an afterthought. She had rarely seen the process, but it suggested to her mind, daisies, and clover, and fresh-colored milkmaids.

Linda laughed, a sudden, irresistible ripple of mirth, that lit up her whole face.

"We never think about its being poetical," she said. "It's there to be done, and we just do it."

"I wonder if that is n't the very essence of poetry — the essential thing done beautifully," Everleth French murmured in a low voice to Annette.

"But I don't know," Linda went on thoughtfully. "Perhaps in the summer-time it is. You get up right soon in the mornin' and the hollers are all full of mist, and the dew on the grass,

and the cobwebs, and the birds just commencing — " she paused, her eyes dark with remembrance — "Why — I reckon it is poetical then," she admitted, her expression far away. "But in the winter-time — " she paused again, staring out at the frozen river, and the heavy winter sky. "It'll be mighty cold milking down home to-night," she said abruptly.

Her hearers saw only a beautiful, slender, dark girl, luxuriously clad, — for Annette indulged herself somewhat in the clothing of Linda, — but she had a sudden wistful vision of a frail slip of a child — her little sister Lidy — going down the narrow, icy path to the stable, shivering under a scanty plaid shawl — the shawl that Linda herself had worn to milking on winter evenings, and that her mother had worn before her. All at once, she could see its faded colors — and frayed edges, and Lidy's thin little face, as clearly as she saw the pleasant room before her and its occupants. She made an involuntary, restless gesture. "Yes," she repeated unconsciously, "it 'll be mighty cold to-night."

"But, dear me! Is it cold down there?" Mrs. Paxton exclaimed. "I had no idea of that; I

was just going to ask you how you were standing the rigors of our Northern climate."

"Oh, it's very cold in West Virginia. You see, it is quite high in the mountains," Annette said, turning to her, and under her explanation of the West Virginian climate Everleth had an opportunity to observe, in an undertone to Linda, "I should like to paint you going across the shining dew in the early morning to your milking."

She regarded him absently a moment, her eyes still far away. Then she smiled. "Well, if you did," she said, "it would be more nearly what I really am than putting one of those long-stemmed roses in my hand."

"Don't you like the rose?" he inquired with quick concern.

"Why, yes, I like it — only it seems funny to think of me being painted with it when I never even seen — never saw — one till this winter."

She looked up and caught Miss French's kindly eyes upon her. "It all seems so funny to me to be here sometimes," she said. "It's so different from what I was raised to."

Everleth looked embarrassed, but Miss French answered with a naturalness almost as perfect as the girl's.

"I suppose it seems as strange to you," she acquiesced, "as — as it would to me to be going milking."

"Yes," Linda assented eagerly. "Why, you don't even talk like what I've been used to — of course," she added quickly, "I know you all are right, and I try to learn — but it comes mighty hard sometimes."

She took them all into her difficulty with the English language, as simply as though it were just a new game she was trying to learn.

"Linda is a great student," Annette remarked. "She is studying very hard all the time."

A sudden light shot up in Linda's eyes, a glowing seriousness. "I want to learn things — I want to learn just all I can," she said with a curious, tense simplicity.

There was a little pause of constrained silence. Across the even flow of easy conventional conversation had leaped a sudden white flame of dedication, of tremendous consecration. It

was startling and disconcerting, and for a moment the little company paused in silence before it, then conversation was resumed again with some trivial remark, and there was a relaxation to the commonplace once more. Shortly afterwards Dorothy Wainwright took her departure, and presently Annette and Linda did likewise. Mrs. Paxton had already gone, and Everleth French and his aunt were alone for a little breathing space between callers.

Everleth moved restlessly about the room, picking up a book here, studying a bit of bric-à-brac there. He lighted a cigarette, and then tossed it away with a quick apology of "I forgot you did n't like smoking here." At length he paused before a picture. "Why don't you give the Corot a change?" he said. "It would get a much better light over on the other wall."

For all her outward composure, Miss French was saying sharply to herself, "What *has* the silly boy got on his mind?" aloud she said, "Very well, Evvy, I'll have it changed to-morrow. You see how obedient I am to the artist of the family. We Frenches have always been just

good, stupid, jog-trot people, and now that we have attained an artist I mean to see that his opinions are respected." It was a remark that she had made so often before that the tongue once set going in its well-worn groove could accomplish it alone with little or no assistance from the mind. Everleth did not appear to think that it required any answer further than an absent laugh. He seated himself at length by his aunt and stared for a short time into the fire. Though he was scarcely twenty-seven, he had achieved already sufficient success in his profession to lift him slightly above the average, but whether he was destined for real greatness, or merely to be one of those clever enough to rise a little above the surface of the commonplace, and yet never to get himself head and shoulders above it, only time would show. There was an air about him of intolerance, of one at variance with his world, yet it was coupled, too, with a certain sensitive weakness, the weakness of a temperament too keenly alive to the opinions of those about him.

"Aunt Louisa," he began abruptly, "what do you think of Linda Stillwater?"

Miss French gave a little inward jump of understanding, but to gain time, she repeated the name out loud uncertainly. "Linda Stillwater? Why — why, I think for one thing she is one of the loveliest little creatures I ever looked at."

"Yes — yes! Of course she is lovely — beautiful! no one could deny that. But what do you *think* of her? What do you think of her whole personality?"

"I think she is very unusual — very charming."

He changed his position restlessly in his chair; at last he blurted out — "I never saw any one like her! There is nobody like her!"

He rose, and began pacing hastily up and down the room again. "She is a wonderful little untouched flower! She is spirit and fire — the vital essence of things! Of *course* Annette Whittemore could n't help adopting her! She is what we all ought to be and are not because we don't dare — we are too afraid of looking into somebody's face and seeing a look of scorn or of laughter there. She is absolute honesty — and naturalness and simplicity. She —" he broke

off, and coming back laid his hand upon the back of his aunt's chair. It shook a little with his emotion. "Aunt Louisa," he said, "I want to marry her — I mean to marry her."

His eyes were very bright and excited, and his voice was not quite steady.

At the announcement Miss Louisa's sensibilities gave another little inward leap. "But of course, I knew that was coming, too," she told herself sharply.

"Well —" she said aloud.

"*Well?*" he cried, his voice sharp with amazement.

She was conscious of a sudden flicker of amusement at his blank surprise. He had, as it were, flung a bomb at her as the representative of his rather conservative family, and she had declined to be blown up by it.

"She has accepted you?" she questioned.

"No — oh, no! It has not come to that yet. In fact" — with a hint of embarrassment — "I have n't asked her yet."

"Are n't you rather anticipating, then?"

"Well —" he paused. "Well, of course I suppose I am, but I can't help hoping unless

there's some one else. You see, she has n't been out here much, and I think I must be almost the only man of any cultivation and refinement that she really knows."

"I wonder if she cares very much for cultivation and refinement," Miss French mused. "And do you? I thought you did n't from the way you spoke of it to Dorothy."

"Of course she cares for deeper things, too, but surely you could see from the way she spoke that she was consumed with a desire to educate herself."

"Well, perhaps — perhaps you are right," his aunt said. "Only — I may be mistaken — but somehow I have a feeling that there is something back of this passionate dedication to learning, and, too, when she speaks of education I don't believe she means intellectual learning altogether — I think, perhaps, she includes an education of the spirit as well. Somehow, I feel it is n't just knowledge for itself that she cares for."

A rather long silence followed. Obviously there was more to be said, and Miss French, who had the gift of patience, waited quietly.

At last Everleth rushed desperately at the point.

"Look here, Aunt Louisa," he blurted out a trifle shamefacedly, "do you think the family will kick up an awful row about it?"

With men of his own age Everleth appeared grown up enough, but with this wise old aunt of his, who had known him all his life and seen him through several college scrapes, his maturity had a trick of slipping, and to his own annoyance he was aware of appearing singularly young with her.

"The family? Do you mean your father?" she questioned.

"Oh, no, not the old Dad so much. I think he'll stand for almost anything within reason — that 's the advantage of being the only son of a widower. I mean the whole family as assembled at Thanksgiving — his uncles, and his cousins, and his aunts, you know."

"Well, I really don't know, but I think — why, yes, I suppose they will, as you say, be inclined to kick up an awful row," she returned. "But, then — does one marry to suit one's Thanksgiving family?"

"Then you approve, at least," he cried eagerly.

"No — no, I did n't say I did."

He looked crestfallen. "Oh, I hoped you did," he said. He began pacing the room again feverishly. "If they do make a row, I don't know whether I can bear it — not on my own account, but for her — I don't think I could stand it for her."

"But if she is spirit and fire, and what we all ought to be, surely she won't mind a little criticism from an everyday, jog-trot family like ours," Miss French suggested dryly.

"Oh, *she* could stand it, of course — she is never concerned over what people may think. But it's whether I can stand it for her, don't you see? I should feel such a brute if I had dragged her into it. Think of her being discussed by people like that Mrs. Paxton — where did you pick her up, Aunt Louisa? I never met her anywhere before? And Dorothy — what a malicious little prig she is getting to be — and I used to rather like her — but now — the outrage of her daring to criticize Linda! You feel her charm, her wonderfulness, don't you?" he appealed.

"Yes, I do, certainly," Miss French admitted.

"But you don't tell me what you really think about it," he said restlessly.

Miss French was silent a moment. "Oh, my dear!" she said at length rather ruefully, "there are so many things I think about it! I'm afraid I'm not much help. Of course it is n't really a question of what the family will think; it's the question whether you and Linda would be happy together, brought up as you have been under such different circumstances."

"I think we should be," he said quietly, all the restlessness and nervousness of his manner suddenly gone.

"Then there's nothing really for me to say, is there?" she answered. And in her own mind there was a little flicker of amusement, as she commented to herself that all youth ever wanted was approval, and never advice, however much it might humbly pretend to desire the latter.

CHAPTER XVI

It was a crisp day, an energetic day, a day that inspired one to do one's duty. Miss Mary Whittemore, Annette's oldest sister, was breakfasting in her pleasant, sunlit dining-room, seated behind the shining silver of the coffee-service. She was always prompt at her breakfast, for her life was made up of a great number of meetings, so that her time was almost as carefully scheduled as that of a fast train, and if she permitted herself to be two minutes late in the morning, it would of course throw her two minutes late all down the busy line of her day — a two minutes which, owing to the dilatory habits of other people, would be almost sure to grow into ten, and might, indeed, stretch as far as the enormity of fifteen before the day was over. She was a plump, cheerful, middle-aged woman, — much older than Annette, — with an alert brown eye, and a rosiness of complexion which spoke of many brisk walks against a stiff east wind, and which was not confined to

her cheeks alone, but spread all over her face. People said that she was devoid of imagination, but admitted that she had an infinite amount of common sense, bordering almost on wisdom. There was only one thing that ever really disturbed her serenity, and that was the loss of time. The phrase that time was for slaves was a flippant remark which she considered almost blasphemous; and the possibility which Annette had sometimes suggested to her — of there being no such thing as time in the next world — was a contingency under which her imagination reeled. Between mouthfuls of her breakfast she opened her letters; glanced over postcards — which were for the most part notifications of different philanthropic meetings; sorted reports, and even found time to look at the headlines of the morning paper. She laid down the last number of the "Outlook for the Blind" as Annette entered.

"Annette," she said, "there's going to be a meeting of the Fly Commission on the 16th; do you care to go to it? I'll remind you when the time comes if you do."

"I do not," said Annette quite firmly.

"Very well," her sister returned, unruffled. "A very interesting man from New York is coming over to speak then. They say he knows practically everything there is to know about flies, especially the house fly. He has very good enlarged lantern slides showing all the germs —"

"Oh, please —!" Annette cut in hastily. "I suppose it is weak of me, but I'd so much rather *not* know all that there is to know about flies, particularly not at breakfast-time." She stirred her coffee a moment in silence.

"Has the unknown no attractions for you, Mary?" she inquired.

"Very little," Miss Whittemore returned honestly.

Annette regarded her with a faint, wistful amusement. Her sister was a happier woman than herself. "Has it ever occurred to you to wonder," she questioned, "whether all the things you are doing are really worth while?"

"Why, of course," Miss Mary returned in surprise. "Why, I look out for that all the time, and the minute I find any association I am working for is inefficient, or is duplicating the

work of some other, I withdraw from it at once."

"Oh, I don't mean individual societies — I mean the whole business of philanthropy. Does it ever occur to you perhaps that it would be better for people to be let alone to work out their own salvation?"

"It does not," returned Miss Mary sturdily, "because, though I admit sometimes people *do* work out their own salvation, on the other hand, I've seen a great many more, who, left to themselves, very speedily worked out their own — well, damnation."

" Well, it must be very nice to be quite sure you are right. I think if I were ever sure I was right I could go ahead too." Annette gave a little sigh, half rueful, half cynical. "I'd give anything for your clear single-mindedness, but distrust of myself and doubts of the good of things are always creeping in to obstruct my progress. I suppose I shall always be like the tribe of Reuben, and while every one else is going out and fighting I shall be abiding among the sheepfolds because of the 'great searchings of heart.'"

"Why, that's from the Song of Deborah, is n't it?" Miss Whittemore said, being innocently proud of her accurate memory.

"I believe it is," Annette returned indifferently, the source of quotations never interesting her particularly. A little silence followed. Miss Mary deplored this trait of indecision in her sister as much as Annette herself did, but she was quite used to it, as, indeed, were all their connection, Annette having long since been ticketed and laid aside in the Whittemore Family Annals as peculiar — but "clever, too, of course, and really a dear."

"Where is Linda?" Miss Mary inquired presently.

"She went for a walk — she often does, you know. I suppose if you've been used to getting up at half-past four or thereabouts all your life you find it hard to stay in bed until half-past seven."

Miss Whittemore glanced at her watch. There were still fifteen minutes left before the time when the front door was due to close behind her as she set forth for her first meeting. Eight minutes was time enough for her to be below-

stairs on the matter of housekeeping, hers being a well-ordered household which required merely a slight push from her to set it running smoothly in its daily groove; three minutes would be sufficient for her to put on her outdoor things, collect her notes, and so forth; there were therefore four minutes left to discuss something with her sister.

"Annette," she said, "I'm not satisfied about Linda."

"About Linda?" Annette cried quickly. "Why, what do you think is wrong with her?"

Very few people ever encounter their ideals. Annette had found one of hers that May morning down in West Virginia, and Linda was always in her mind set a little apart from the ordinary run of humanity. She saw her always, as she had seen her that first day in the glamour and freshness and romance of an early spring morning.

"I think you are trying a dangerous experiment with her," Miss Whittemore said. "You know, I've thought so from the very first."

"I know you have, but why should you think

so? I'm only trying to give Linda what you and I both had at her age."

"Yes; but, you see, we were brought up to it, whereas Linda had seventeen years of an absolutely different life before you stepped in and played Fate with her."

"But what harm can it do?" Annette persisted.

"Well, I think it is harm to endeavor to make a sophisticated person out of a perfectly simple one."

"What signs, please, of sophistication do you notice about Linda?" Annette challenged.

"Well, I admit I don't notice any yet."

"No, and I don't believe you ever will; the foundations of her being had been laid too deep and sure in simplicity."

"Well, granted you don't succeed in spoiling her, — and I sincerely hope you won't, — there's another side to it — Linda's not happy."

"Not happy!" Annette cried. "But why should n't she be?"

"I don't know exactly *why* she should n't be, and perhaps she does n't know herself, but I am afraid something has been lost out of her

life that all the trinkets and furs and travel and education can't make up for."

Annette regarded her for a moment in some concern. "Do you think she's homesick, then?" she asked at last.

"It may be that — and yet I'm not sure. No, I can't imagine she's homesick for the actual home she ran away from, but —" Here Miss Mary looked at her watch, and stopped in the middle of her sentence. There was more to be said, but the four minutes were up. "Well, I must fly," she said.

Annette had a brief inward vision of her plump sister flying, but she made no comment, and Miss Mary gathered up her circulars, fastened her glasses more firmly on her nose, and passed out of the dining-room — the curtain having risen upon her busy, zestful day.

Annette had in reality a great regard for Miss Mary's intuition and common sense, and later that morning, when she and Linda were walking along the avenue toward Everleth's studio where Linda was to give him a sitting for her portrait, she said rather anxiously, "Linda, are you ever homesick?"

Linda shot a quick look at her and then stared away down the Avenue.

"I have n't any home to be sick for," she said.

"But don't you ever long for a sight of your mountains? — you must tell me if you are n't happy here."

A wistful look crept into the girl's face. "It'll be harder to stand when the spring opens," she said.

"But it must n't be a case of *standing* it, Linda, dear," Annette said in distress. "If you feel homesick and want to go South, I'll take you at any time."

Linda looked at her with a sudden quick affection. "You certainly *have* been good to me!" she cried. She was silent a moment, walking unseeingly. "But even you can't give me what I want," she added sombrely after a moment.

"What is it that you want?" Annette persisted.

Linda flung out one hand with a sudden poignant, involuntary gesture, but she did not speak.

They were passing at the moment a little

company of babies with their nurses — babies all the way from six months to three years old, their cheeks pink, and their eyes sparkling in the winter sunshine.

Annette did not understand the gesture. "What is it that you want?" she asked again, as, avoiding the babies, she overtook Linda, who was walking very fast.

Linda caught her breath. "I want something — something that is mine!" she burst out, the words seeming to speak themselves in spite of her. "Oh, something that is more mine than anything else in all the world!"

Annette looked at her, startled. "But — but I don't understand, Linda —"

"No — no!" the girl broke in, in a low, hurried, passionate voice. "No, you don't understand — and I've never — never been able to tell you. But some day I will. I dunno why, but things get locked up tight inside of me sometimes, an' I just can't tell *nobody*. I want to tell you, but I can't — not yet. I ought to tell you — but I hope you'll forgive me, an' understand. I ain't deceiving you on purpose."

"Why, of course — of course, I understand,"

Annette said, quickly, and touched the other's arm with a fleeting, reassuring caress. She was puzzled, but the pressure of her hand spoke of infinite trust and sympathy.

They walked several squares in silence, then Linda spoke again. "I wish I could hear from Lidy," she said restlessly. "But I suppose Lily and my father won't let her write. I've written and written and sent her stamps and everything, but I *never* hear. I feel like, when I ran down Freedom Ridge, big doors had slammed between me and all that life, and I can't get them open again. I dream sometimes that I'm knocking and knocking at a big door on the other side of which is myself, like what I used to be, and the door won't open, and won't open, and then all at once it does, but then I always wake up."

"Do you want the door to open — do you want to get back to your old life, Linda?"

"No! No!" the girl cried. "And yet —"

She did not complete the sentence and in a few minutes more they came to the building overlooking the Fenway where Everleth had his studio.

Having her portrait painted seemed to Linda a great waste of time, and she would much rather have been studying, but Annette had desired to have it done so much that she had yielded to her wish.

Everleth French looked up to greet them as they came down the stairway into his big corner studio. His eyes were very bright, and his face was excited and eager.

"Stand there a moment — stand just there— *please!*" he cried suddenly to Linda as she paused on the landing halfway down the stair. Annette descended the rest of the way, and, standing by Everleth, they both looked up at the girl on the landing above them. Obedient to Everleth's command, she had paused in the very act of descending. One hand rested lightly on the banister, and her body swayed a little to that side as she looked down at them. She had obeyed him so promptly that she was caught, as it were, on the very wing of motion. Though she was still, her whole pose suggested movement and vivacity. Her cheeks and eyes were bright from the sharp air of out of doors, and her lips were parted in a little faint smile, a

smile that was at once friendly and aloof, and lightened but did not hide the wistfulness of her eyes. The expression was almost that of a young Mona Lisa. Her inscrutable eyes rested frankly on whatever she looked at, but back of them was always that sense of reserve, of owning herself, with which Annette was constantly being struck.

Everleth drew a deep breath. "*If* I can only do it," he said, half aloud. "Thank you," he added, "thank you," and came up the stair to greet her in his restless, nervous way.

Linda went into the tiny dressing-room to slip on the costume in which she was being painted. She reappeared presently clad in a white evening frock, made very simply as to trimming, but showing a richness of material and knowingness of cut that spoke of anything but simplicity. She came across the room, the white folds of her dress shimmering softly around her, and started to mount to the model throne, but there she paused abruptly, startled.

"Oh! what is it!" she breathed. "What is it that I smell! — it reminds me of home!" She stood still, looking about with dark, startled eyes. "It's some flower — the perfume of a

flower I knew down there," she cried, under her breath. Her face had turned pale, and her eyes were wide and almost frightened.

"It's these poets' narcissi, perhaps," Everleth suggested. "I got them because they seemed more like you than the rose." As he spoke he held them out to her. They were the Easter flowers that Armstrong Decker had planted as a surprise to Linda in their little yard on the side of Freedom Ridge.

She put out her hand in a sharp gesture. "Oh, please," she said. "Oh, please, I'd rather have the rose."

"You don't like these, then?" he said, a little disappointed.

"No — no! I — I would rather have the rose!"

He was puzzled by her vehemence, but he did not press the flowers upon her.

"I really think the rose is better," he said. "It gives just the little note of color that is needed."

In silence Linda settled herself to her pose and picked up the long-stemmed, luxurious rose that he had placed for her. She leaned lightly

back against the carved oak chair in which she was seated and the light shimmered over the satin of her frock and brought out difficult, underlying depths of opal color.

Everleth studied her a moment with the artist's critical appreciation, frowning a little unconsciously. "It's magnificent!" he burst out at last, the charm of the girl's personality overmastering him for the moment.

Annette smiled a little to herself at his enthusiasm. She had not wanted Linda to be painted in an elaborate evening frock, but she had not been able to make Everleth see her objections. She glanced at Linda and caught a fleeting look of amusement upon her lips, as well.

It was the look almost of an older person watching a child at play. A person older in the experiences of life. Annette noticed it and also noted that, in spite of the smile, Linda's face was still a little pale from the startled look that had leaped into it when Everleth had held out the narcissi to her.

"She *is* homesick!" Annette told herself. "Those flowers brought it all back to her."

She paused a moment to worry over this

thought; then picking up the book she had brought with her, she almost immediately lost herself and her surroundings in its contents as completely as she always did in any bit of writing that laid hold upon her fancy.

For a long time the silence of the room was broken only by the rushing past of an occasional train on the near-by tracks, sending up, as it went by, fluffs of white steam which changed all the light of the studio, and made Everleth mutter sharply under his breath, and pause in extreme exasperation until it had gone. Between times he painted furiously, his face a study of absorption and artistic emotion, and Linda sat with that inscrutable expression upon her lips and looked deep into the heart of her rose.

At length he flung down his brush with a little burst of despair.

"I can't do it!" he cried; "I can't do it! Great Heavens! Why did I ever think I could!"

He slipped his thumb out of his palette, and going over to a small stand, took a cigarette and with a quick, "May I smoke?" lighted it almost before Annette could give her permission.

He began to move restlessly about the room, now staring out of the window and now drawn back irresistibly to study the canvas from different distances with frowning eyes.

Annette, her finger still in her book marking the place, came over to look at it.

"But really I think it's quite good," she protested.

Everleth shrugged himself irritably away without reply.

From her throne Linda studied them both thoughtfully, with her wide, calm gaze. Then, stretching delicately all over as though trying each supple, young muscle to see if it were in trim, she stepped down and approached the portrait. Immediately Everleth came back and stood beside her, searching her face, and glancing from it to the canvas.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What is the matter with the thing?"

She looked at it gravely for a little while in no nervous haste to offer an opinion. At length she turned to him. "It's a mighty pretty picture," she said (he winced a little); "but it just is n't me."

"Of course — of course, it is n't. But *why* is n't it you?"

She shook her head. "I dunno — I don't know — but I reckon the reason is," she began, and paused a moment, — "I suppose the reason is," she corrected herself without haste and without embarrassment, "that you've tried to paint me like you think I am — or maybe," — there was a hint of wistfulness in her tone, — "like you think I ought to be, and — and I ain't really — I'm not really that way at all."

She turned away after a moment and her eyes wandered over the studio.

"What a number of pretty things you have here," she said; adding with a little fleeting laugh, "I just kept from saying what a 'chanst' of things; that's what we'd say in the mountains."

"Some of the things are rather good," he said, avoiding her eye in some embarrassment, for he could not take her difficulties over the English language with her happy simplicity. "But I have a terrible habit of collecting a lot of junk when I'm traveling that really is n't worth anything."

"Everything's powerful dusty," Linda said.

He laughed. "Well, I suppose, of course, that is what would strike the feminine eye first."

"Oh, let me dust them for you," she begged, with sudden eagerness. "I want to — I should like to."

"Why, of course I shan't," he said, frowning a little. "I'll have the place cleaned properly to-morrow."

"Oh, but I want to," she persisted. "I have n't dusted or cleaned up for so long." She stretched out her slender, capable hands and laughed as she opened and shut them. "My hands feel hungry — sort of hungry for real work — just let me do a little dusting while I rest."

"Well, if you must," he assented ungraciously, and hunting up a paint cloth he gave it to her for a duster. Then he turned away and sitting down by Annette began a quick, disjointed stream of talk, flashing nervously and brilliantly from one topic of the day to another, and trying, unsuccessfully, to keep his eyes off Linda.

Linda moved softly here and there about the

room, and presently forgetting the others she began to croon in a faint, half-voice to herself. It was a hymn — most of her work had gone off to the tune of some hymn.

"Work for the night is coming,
Work through the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work 'mid springing flowers.
Work when the day grows brighter,
Work in the glowing sun;
Work for the night is coming,
When man's work is done."

As she went very softly, almost on tiptoe, about the room, she seemed to herself to be slipping into a dream. The walls of the studio, with their queer, faded tapestries, seemed to fall away, and in their place were the kitchen walls, hung with the cooking-utensils of her little cabin on Freedom Ridge. Outside there was no longer the network of city streets, but instead were long, white stretches of untracked snow, and in the distance the frowning blue of winter mountains.

Suddenly Everleth broke sharply off in the midst of a sentence and laid his hand involuntarily upon Annette's arm. Following his

eyes, she saw Linda as she stood at the far end of the studio reaching up to a large, blue bowl on a shelf above her head. All at once Annette and Everleth saw her as she saw herself at that moment —an unsophisticated maiden going happily about her household tasks.

The simple lines of her frock showed the strength and lightness of her figure, and with her bare arms stretched above her head, she was no longer the little still doll in a satin dress, but was herself, Linda Stillwater, with all her personality beautifully and gracefully alive with the responsibility of a task to be accomplished.

"Of course!" Everleth cried; "of course!" And getting up quickly he went over to the easel and slashed two long dabs of paint over the satin finery of the artificial little figure looking into its hothouse flower.

"Why, *Everleth!*" Annette cried, aghast.

But Everleth crossed swiftly to Linda without heeding her. "I've found you — I've found the real you!" he cried.

She turned at his words, her eyes still misty with the dream of the cabin on the side of Freedom Ridge.

"Oh, what have you done to the picture!" she gasped.

"It was n't you," he answered, his eyes flaming with excitement. "And it's *you* I want — the real you!"

There was a sudden strained embarrassment in the room.

Annette's heart gave a bound of excitement, and she dropped her eyes to her book. Linda looked straight at Everleth, her eyes a little startled, and the surprised color beginning to creep faintly into her cheeks.

But even as the words escaped him, Everleth sought to catch them back.

"It 's the real you that I want to paint," he qualified, stammering a little.

The tension of the moment was broken. Linda turned away with an odd little smile and replaced the bowl on its shelf. She was the first to speak.

"I was thinking that was a crock of milk and I was taking it down to skim for supper," she said. "For a little bit I could n't think where I was."

CHAPTER XVII

It was the day after Everleth had destroyed his portrait of Linda. The cold still held. The sky was a heavy, forbidding gray, which promised more snow, and which set forth the whole white world in silent, sharp outline.

Everleth had brought Linda to Jamaica Pond to skate, an accomplishment which he had taught her that winter.

There were other skaters upon the pond, the car line was not far distant, and there was a constant passing of sleighs along the driveway, while voices and laughter were occasionally heard, but all sounds were muffled by the hollow, heavy atmosphere and by the blanket of snow. The whiteness, the stillness, and the promise of more snow gave a sense of unreality and remoteness.

As Linda took Everleth's hand and stepped down on the ice, she paused a moment, looking restlessly over the smooth expanse of the pond, dotted with skaters and fringed along its edges

with snow-laden bushes, some of which still retained their leaves in which the colors of autumn yet burned faintly red through the snow.

"Something is going to happen," she said slowly, hardly above her breath.

He looked at her in surprise.

"What do you mean?" he questioned.

"Don't you feel it? The far-awayness of everything — the — the mystery. It sort of presses down on you. You must feel it! I *know* something is going to happen."

"I think it is going to snow, if that is what you mean," he answered. He looked curiously into her face that was beginning to glow with a deep excitement, and his own pulses stirred with a sense of her beauty.

"Yes! yes, it will snow!" she returned breathlessly. "But I wish it would thunder and lighten and storm — and that I could hear the thunder leaping and crackling in the mountains. I want to put up my hands and push it back — push the sky away." She raised her hands with a vivid, eager gesture as she looked up at the stretch of cold, ominous, heavy clouds above

her. "Oh! I feel as though it was pressing down on me! I feel — like if I could only holler loud enough — shout loud enough — I'd break a hole in the sky, and all the snow it's holding up would pour down in a white flood. I don't know why — but it makes me want to shout and sing — and run and run. Oh, let us skate!" she broke off. "Let us skate *fast!*"

With the words she dropped his hand suddenly and flashed away from him.

Everleth had found her a wonderfully apt pupil in learning to skate; all the swiftness and grace of her body were brought into joyous motion by the exercise, and that day she skated like one possessed — and she was possessed by the still, brooding intoxication of the atmosphere, and by the forces of nature, which sometimes caught her in an imperious grip. Forces which left Everleth, city man as he was, unmoved. He did not understand her mood, but from a different cause his own emotions were beginning to leap. He was not a very fast skater, and it was necessary for him to put forth all his strength to overtake the slender, flying figure before him. Time and again when he was almost

beside her, with a little, excited laugh, she doubled quickly and was away again.

The pursuit began to stir his pulses, the air came sharply against his face, he heard the long, smooth stroke of his skates, and before him was Linda, with her maddening grace of movement, and the spirit and fire of her personality. He was fascinated by her, and yet furiously angry that she eluded him. He forgot suddenly to wonder what sort of a figure he presented in this wild chase, and if the other skaters were watching him. For an overwhelming space he was swept gloriously out of his everyday, conventional self — he was a man, and before him was the woman he desired. With a sudden burst of speed he overtook her, and caught her hand imperiously.

"We will skate together," he cried.

Her dark, sparkling eyes flashed up to his as their hands met.

She was borne on wings of excitement by the swift motion, by the heavy repression of the air, and by the fire of her own spirit.

The imperious hand of nature, in the full sweep of out of doors was upon her, gripping

her as it had gripped her in childhood, when the lights and shadows upon the hills, the hurry of the wind, and the feel of an oncoming storm would drive her into the mountains, there to race and sing and dance through their depths with only the woods to spy upon her.

"We must skate fast—*fast!*" she cried breathlessly, as their hands met. Together they swung away across the long gray-white sweep of ice, in a final wild dash of speed. At the upper end of the pond, far away from the other skaters he swung her round and brought them both to a stand, their skates cutting deep into the ice.

They faced each other, panting and breathless with life.

"Linda!" he cried, still holding her hands. "Linda, will you marry me?"

She looked at him with far-away, unseeing eyes. The gray dusk of the early winter evening enveloped them now, and the first reluctant flakes of snow had begun to descend in utter silence.

"It's commenced to snow," she said, and turned her face up to the sky, meeting the soft

flakes upon her cheeks, her lips, and closed eyes.

He twitched her hands impatiently, as though to awaken her. "Linda!" he cried again. "Linda, don't you hear me — will you marry me?"

She opened her eyes wide, startled and aroused. Standing a little away from him for a long moment she stared at him, her head flung back with the alert gaze of a wild animal. Then she laughed a low laugh of mad excitement.

"Yes," she cried; "yes — I'll marry you!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The lights were made, the curtains drawn, and the fire leaping upon the hearth in the Whittemore drawing-room. The tea-things were set cosily forth with the "Transcript," damp from the falling snow, folded beside them. It was almost five o'clock, and the room, the tea-table, and the "Transcript" awaited Miss Mary Whittemore's coming. Annette paced rather restlessly up and down as she waited for her sister. It was a trick she had, this pacing back and forth, her fine head bent a little forward, and her long, sensitive, incapable hands clasped loosely behind her — thinking and thinking. "Thinking and thinking, and *never* getting anywhere!" Miss Mary was apt to comment to herself. To her practical mind all thought was useless which did not very speedily crystallize into action.

At last the bell rang and Miss Whittemore appeared.

"You may bring up the hot water, Susan,"

she said to the maid, and went upstairs to take off her outdoor things.

She reappeared presently, her face pleasant and rosy, and her whole makeup glowing with contentment, a contentment which was made up partly of the realization of a well-spent, busy day at her back and partly of the comfortable fact that she was hungry for her tea, and that she had slipped off her heavy walking-boots and put on slippers.

"What's in the 'Transcript'?" she asked briskly as she filled the teapot.

"I have n't looked at it," Annette admitted.

Miss Mary's was too placid a mind and body to be easily irritated, but she did deplore this indifference on Annette's part to the "Transcript." She was constantly disturbed by her sister's lack of zest and interest in her Boston life. It was Miss Mary's wholesome belief that if you led a certain kind of life you should lead it with enthusiasm, and meet its established customs at least halfway. But she realized that this was just another evidence of Annette's deplorable habit of not playing the game.

She took the paper up, and unfolded it with a quick, efficient jerk.

"Ah, here's a very good account of our meeting; I was afraid there was hardly time for that to get in," she said.

Miss Whittemore and Annette rarely met at lunch and it was the former's habit at tea-time to give a detailed account of her day.

"This has been a full day," she began now, laying down the paper and beginning to pour tea. "I went first, of course, to District Ten, and there we had so long a discussion that I barely had time to run in for part of Dr. Price's lecture on feeble-mindedness, — that was most interesting. I was sorry I had to miss the beginning. He told us of several of the earmarks of mental deficiency, and do you know, Annette, I got to thinking it over, and it's appalling, but some of our own friends have the marks."

"I have n't a doubt I have all of them," Annette returned as she took her cup of tea.

Her sister paused in the act of lifting the teapot and considered the other's dark, restless face, with its fine, wistful eyes and sensitive mouth.

"Turn your head a little so I can see your

ears," she commanded. "No," she went on, as Annette obeyed; "no, I don't see any of the marks."

"I breathe again," Annette laughed. "And then what did you do?" she questioned. It did not seem to Annette that anything on earth would ever induce her to lead the life her sister did, but she admitted a certain fascination in hearing about it.

"Well, after that I ran round to the model flat for lunch. They're doing a wonderful work there training those girls in housekeeping, and, of course, they wanted me to stay a little while and inspect things, so there was only just time for this last meeting, and then home. And what did you do?" Miss Mary wound up. Though as a rule she disapproved of the way in which Annette spent her days, yet she always accorded her the courtesy of an interest in them.

"Oh, I did n't have a very satisfactory day. I tried to write in the morning without much success, and in the afternoon I took a walk, made a few calls, and dropped in to the Abbots' tea. Certainly not a day to compare to yours."

"If I were you, Annette," her sister said frankly, "I think I should give up trying to write. You give the very best hours of the morning to it."

"Hours that I might be spending at fly commissions?"

"Well, not fly commissions, of course, if they don't appeal to you; but there are a lot of other things you might choose from."

"And out of them all I choose to be an unsuccessful writer," Annette said quietly.

"Well, what did Linda do to-day?" Mary inquired, to change the subject, aware that she might be upon dangerous ground.

"Linda? Oh, she went to her classes, of course, in the morning, and this afternoon she is skating with Everleth French."

Miss Mary set down her cup rather abruptly.

"Oh, Annette. I do think that's dangerous!" she said.

"Which is dangerous, Mary? Skating or Everleth?" Annette said, choosing to be a trifle obtuse.

"You can't pretend you don't know what I mean, Annette."

"Oh, of course, I know what you mean," the other admitted. "You mean because he is a French, and a member of dear knows how many other prominent families, it would be a dreadful thing if he married Linda Stillwater, who has no family at all to speak of."

"Yes, of course, that's it, only, Annette, you know I'm more worried over Linda's happiness than I am over Everleth's."

"Well, there 've been plenty of marriages of that kind that have been happy."

"Yes, and plenty more that have n't. You see," Miss Mary resumed after the little pause which followed her last remark, "I don't believe Everleth is a big enough man for such a situation. Of course, his artistic side may sweep him off his feet temporarily, but he'll always be swayed by the conventions in the end."

"Oh, the conventions!" Annette said impatiently.

"Of course, I know how you feel about them, Annette, but, you see, that is n't the question — it is n't what you feel or what I feel, or even what Linda feels — it's what Everleth French feels, and it is n't even what he feels about the

conventions at present that's going to matter, it's what he'll feel about them in the future when the first glamour and wonder of Linda has worn off."

"Oh, Mary, you are always so wise," Annette sighed. "But I'm not even sure," she added, "that he cares for Linda."

"Well, I sincerely hope he does n't," her sister returned. She glanced at the clock as she spoke and rose. "I must go and dress," she said.

It was Saturday and Miss Mary always went to the Symphony, not that she was particularly musical, but because she believed in a well-balanced life, and felt that it was necessary to throw an occasional sop to the artistic side of existence, as an offset against becoming too entirely philanthropic.

Left to herself, Annette sat for some time staring into the fire, musing upon the complications of life. Certainly she had not been blind to the difficulties of the situation should Linda and Everleth fall in love with each other. But the difficulties appeared to her drearily obvious, and her peculiar temperament was always prone to leap over the obvious in pursuit of the subtle

and unexpected. However, she admitted reluctantly now that in all probability her sister was quite right, and that the obvious in this case must be taken into consideration. "I'll speak to Linda," she said to herself, "or — no, I'll just take her away for a little change. Perhaps she would like to go South and visit that friend of hers at the hospital."

She gave a little nod of satisfied decision, and at that instant Linda entered.

She brought with her the fresh vivacity of out of doors and a wave of sharp, cold air lingered about her for a moment before the warmth of the room dissipated it. Her eyes were very bright and dark. On her toque and furs little bright points of moisture that had been snowflakes glistened, and there was about her a still, restrained excitement that was more intense than any outburst would have been.

Annette realized it at once, and her heart began to beat a little faster. She turned rather self-consciously toward the tea-things.

"I suppose there 's no good offering you tea, Linda," she said nervously.

Linda laughed. "Tea!" she cried, and laughed

again. At her back, was the remembrance of the wild flight across the ice in the dusk, the feel of the oncoming storm, and the touch of Everleth's hands. She walked over to the fire and, turning, faced the other.

"Annette," she said, "I'm going to marry Mr. French."

Annette felt the room swirl round before her. Then, provokingly enough, a little frightened, side-tracked amusement glinted across her mind at the thought of herself solemnly planning, just a moment before, to take Linda out of danger. Certainly she had shut the stable door a little late.

"Oh, Linda!" she gasped at length weakly.

"Are you glad, Annette, are you glad?" the girl cried in that low, excited voice. She stood up very straight and tall, imperiously young and full of life.

"I — I don't know — no —" Annette drew a deep breath. "No, Linda, dearest, I'm afraid I'm not."

But Linda did not heed the reply. She took a turn or two up and down the room, and then paused by Annette.

"Oh, Annette!" she said breathlessly, "I'm just little Lindy Stillwater out of the back woods, and Mr. French keers — cares — for me! I don't hardly know anything, and he — why, there hardly seems to be a thing he does n't know erbout! Oh, you don't know what it means to me to have a man like that care for me. It makes me want to study harder 'n ever, an' learn things so's — so — I can be something sho 'nough to him. I've had a reason for wanting to learn right from the first, an' for wanting to be as fine and good as I could be, and now I'll want to work for him, too, an' — an' — I'm looking to you, Annette, to learn me — to teach me things."

She had dropped down on the floor at Annette's side and was looking at her with her vivid, dark face all alight.

"Oh, Linda!" Annette cried involuntarily. "How can I let you go so soon! Stay with me a little longer."

The girl gave her a quick, affectionate look, but she said, "I think Mr. French 'lows to be married in the spring."

Annette was silent for a moment, tongue-tied

by that paralyzing gift of hers for seeing all the different sides to a question, and all the possibilities of a situation.

"Well," she said at last, trying to speak lightly, and hardly aware of her words — "well, if you are to enter Everleth's family circle, I suppose I must really set about teaching you not to say 'he 'lows' for 'he intends.'"

With a shock she saw Linda's face burn suddenly crimson, and the tears leap into her eyes. The girl struggled to her feet.

"Oh!" she cried poignantly, "Oh, there *is* a powerful lot fer me to learn! I mean — I mean —" she broke off and stared about her with a bewildered look; "I mean there is a great deal for me to learn," she said at length, speaking slowly as though feeling her way among the unaccustomed words. Then she turned quickly and left the room. Her head was held proudly, but Annette had seen the crimson flush and the mist of tears, and realized with a little pang that this was the first time that Linda had shown the slightest self-consciousness or embarrassment over her mountain phraseology.

CHAPTER XIX

The weeks went by, and presently Christmas was passed, and the winter had swung into the new year. Linda and Everleth had not as yet announced their engagement.

"It 's just our secret," Linda had pleaded. "Don't let's tell anybody yet. I think," she added shyly, "that a secret like ours is like a white flower growing by itself 'way off somewhere in the deep woods where it's all still and alone, and when the secret's told it's like some one had come along and picked the flower."

Annette was troubled, but only her journal was aware of it.

"I seem destined," she wrote, "always to play the part of spectator at the drama of life. Never to have anything in my own existence so engrossing that I cannot always turn aside to watch the game as played by others. And yet look on as I will, I seem aloof from it all, and can never put out so much as one little finger to change it for any one else. I am watching

Linda just now, and I am frightened about her, and yet I seem powerless to help her. I see her in danger of being shaken out of her absolute simplicity and lack of self-consciousness. And the danger lies in love. Nothing else could ever have affected her, but for love I believe she would try to make her whole nature over. But perhaps that is not possible, perhaps, try as she may, she cannot change her real self. I trust with all my heart that this is so, and also that I may be mistaken, and that she may not be in as great danger of being conventionalized as I fear. But there never appears in Everleth's mind to be any idea of the need of making himself over for Linda — never any thought of changing his conventional outlook for her absolutely simple one. Oh, no; if any one is to be changed it is Linda — that little child of the mountains and of the freedom of the spirit. He has taken it upon himself to set her English right — a thing I have never attempted, partly because I believed time would correct it, but chiefly because I would rather have her keep all her mountain words than run the risk of loosing one jot of that absolute unconsciousness of hers. I

could be very angry with Everleth, only I do not believe he knows what he is doing. He is as much in the blind grip of Fate, which in this case happens to be love, as Linda herself."

A loan exhibition was being held in a private gallery on the Hill, and every one had lent their tapestries and most unique jewels, and ancestors who had been fortunate enough to be painted by a Copley or a Stuart were given the opportunity of greeting old friends and neighbors not seen for a hundred years, and perhaps of wondering a little, in the striking similarity of ancestors in general, which were their friends, and which themselves. The gallery was lighted by candles, as being appropriate to ancestors and tapestry, and beyond the immediate circle of light the black shadows wavered and danced grotesquely, flung darkly here and there by every gust that quivered through the yellow flames, and out of respect to the ancestors, people moved softly, and greeted one another in sibilant whispers.

Annette Whittemore went quietly about among the dimly-lighted cases. She had a good deal of fondness for and appreciation of art,

though she had never devoted herself particularly to it; also she had a liking for a crowd. She liked to sense the underlying spirit that animates different assemblies, and in this instance the little scraps of whispered conversation which she overheard amused her. "Well, does n't our little baby grandmother look *sweet!* It's the dearest portrait of a baby here." "My eyes! What tapestries! who lent them?" "Well, of course, that *is* a beautiful Copley, but I think our Great-Aunt Sybil is finer." "Did you see those jewels in that case over by the wall? My dear, there's an old Spanish chain there — well, you just come and look at it!"

As Annette moved about among the cases a large hand was laid upon her arm, and turning, she beheld Miss Louisa French.

"Why does every one whisper?" the old lady demanded, speaking herself hardly above her breath.

Annette smiled. "I don't know," she whispered back.

"My dear, it's ancestor worship — no less!" She peered about with rather near-sighted eyes. "Let us sit down somewhere."

They found a divan in a secluded corner a little away from the main thoroughfare of the crowd, where they might sit in the shadow and look out upon the candle-lighted hall.

"Now, as a matter of fact," Miss French continued, staring vaguely before her, "my ancestor shot two Indians before breakfast one morning — I don't really think a natural tone of voice would upset him too much."

"And mine just escaped being burned for a witch — they really need n't whisper on her account either," Annette returned with a smile.

"But you must n't laugh," Miss French hastened to say. "If we laugh, we might wake up. I'm Boston born and bred — brown bread, of course, my dear oldest brother used to say — and so are you forever and ever, so *we* may say what we please, but, of course, I should resent such comments from an outsider."

"Oh, dear Miss French!" Mrs. Paxton cried, fluttering up at this moment. "Is n't it all quite too — too wonderful!"

"What becomes of a thing when it gets too — too wonderful?" Miss French pondered.

"Oh, you *are* wicked! I suppose we do get into ridiculously extravagant ways of expressing ourselves. But I *am* enthusiastic — I don't think there's another city in America that could give such an exhibition."

"I am quite sure there is n't," Miss French returned.

"Ah, Miss Whittemore," Mrs. Paxton went on, "I saw your charming little protégée just a moment ago. She and Mr. French were admiring that *wonderful* old lace."

Annette did not reply at once. She resented having Linda spoken of as her little protégée, and also she was conscious of a little dull heartache that Linda should be admiring old lace, but she told herself that this feeling was wholly unreasonable.

"Do you know," Mrs. Paxton went on, with an engaging air of discovery, "Miss Stillwater strikes me as having a great deal of charm — and then, too, I think there is always something rather fascinating about a child of nature — one just brought up in the mountains and out of doors — and all that. Have you ever thought of it, Miss Whittemore?"

"I have," said Annette.

"And what about Mr. French's portrait of her? Has he finished it — I really must drop in to his studio and see it — his things are always *so* wonderful!"

"It is n't finished yet. He decided he did n't like the way he was doing her at first, and he gave that up, and since then he's made several fresh starts, but he has n't been satisfied with any of them; he says he is feeling around for just the right pose."

"That 's right," Mrs. Paxton commented in a tone of patronizing approval that made Annette feel that not only herself, but Everleth and Linda as well, had been patted upon the back with a comprehensive hand.

"Well, I simply *must* have another look at those fans," Mrs. Paxton continued, and with a nod of farewell she drifted back into the shadowy crowd.

When her back was safely turned, Miss French laid a hand upon Annette's wrist.

"What do you think of that?" she demanded abruptly.

"Of what?" Annette asked, and then follow-

ing Miss French's gaze, she beheld Everleth and Linda Stillwater inspecting a case of cameos at a little distance.

"Oh —" she said and paused. It came first to her lips to say, "Oh, I don't like it," but she finally compromised with, "I don't know what to think."

"Everleth has told me of their engagement," Miss French said.

"And what did you say?"

"I? I probably said to him just what you said to Linda."

"But I'm afraid I hardly said anything to Linda — how can one?"

"Exactly," answered the other, "I hardly said anything to Everleth — how can one?"

"There are so many sides to every question," Annette sighed, "and I seem to see every side at once. I wish I had on blinders like some placid old cart-horse so that I could never see anything but just the straight-ahead, obvious thing — I might get somewhere then. But I know one thing," she broke off, "if this does not turn out happily I shall never forgive myself. Mary's constantly reminding me that it's a terrible

responsibility when one undertakes to play Fate with another person."

"So you think you played Fate when you adopted Linda? How do you know that Fate was n't playing with you?"

Annette laughed. "Well, that would certainly lift the responsibility from my shoulders," she said, "but, all the same, I shall feel terribly guilty if unhappiness overtakes Linda."

Miss French laid a kind hand on her knee — "And if she wins out of it a happiness she could never have had except for you — you'll never take any credit to yourself for that. My dear," she concluded, with a little affectionate pressure, "remember your friends like you a great deal better than you like yourself."

Annette's sensitive face flushed.

"Oh," she murmured, surprised and touched, "you do understand, don't you! Yes, that's my difficulty — the extreme dislike that I've always had for myself."

There was a moment of silence, and then Annette spoke wistfully.

"So you think there's a chance of happiness for them both out of it?"

"Oh, I think there is decidedly."

"It is n't as though I had taken her out of a happy home, and transplanted her just for my own whim," Annette went on, arguing it out as much to satisfy her own conscience as for Miss French. "You see, she was wandering through the mountains all alone, when I offered to take her, and she might have come to much worse harm."

"Worse than having you give her an education and an extremely comfortable home? — Well, I should think so, indeed."

"Well, I don't know —" Annette still hesitated. "I don't know that all those things really count for anything with Linda. Certainly the luxury does n't, but I believe she does care about the education — she seems to have an ideal of perfection that she is struggling to reach, — I don't just understand what it is, — and sometimes I feel as though there were something in her life that I know nothing about."

"After all," Miss French went on presently, "what can you and I do about it? Really nothing that I can see. In the theatres in the slums, they tell me if the audience sees the

heroine about to make a mistake it rises up and shouts a warning to her — but you see, we don't do that in the Back Bay theatres — and we're too unsure of our own convictions to do it in real life — so there you are. It 's the modern paralyzing fear of over-influencing another personality. But I'm glad of it. I'm glad I can't put my hand out and push the other pieces about to suit my whim. What a dull world it would be — thank Heaven for individuality!"

Annette looked at her with a pensive curiosity.

"You honestly find life interesting, don't you?" she questioned.

"Don't you?"

"Well — sometimes, only — " her voice trailed into silence.

"Ah! that's because you haven't got the real old-age grip on life, Annette — you're still young enough not to have taken hold with both hands. While I — why, the older I grow the tighter I want to hold on. I seem to be only just beginning to understand — to get my first really broad, detached view of it all."

Annette's face lighted up.

"Once or twice I have found life interesting, too — oh, wonderful!" she confessed. "Occasionally something seems to sweep me off my feet — something bigger and stronger and younger than my usual self. Something elemental within me —"

Her face was flushed and excited. She had forgotten the subdued whispers, and spoke in her natural tone of voice.

"Something elemental within you," a voice drawled out of the shadows beside her, and looking up she perceived that Everleth French and Linda had approached. He laughed softly. He had an unconscious trick of manner which at times verged on the supercilious — and there was now, though he laughed, an edge of irritation in his low, half-whispered words. "What a truly Boston remark," he continued.

"But why a Boston remark? Why not just a perfectly natural human remark?" Miss French said in level tones.

Annette was amused and grateful over Miss French's defense, though she really hardly required it. She had too much poise to be easily embarrassed, and certainly Everleth French,

who had been her brother's classmate, and whom she had known since dancing-school days, was not likely to put her out of countenance.

"Oh, well," Everleth returned with a faint shrug to his aunt's question, "I think it is a Boston characteristic to talk about one's elemental self. They're not so apt to do it in other places." He flashed suddenly round on Linda. "Do they talk about their elemental selves where you come from — down on — what's the name of your ridge?"

"Freedom Ridge," she supplied, looking at him steadily.

"Yes, that's it. Do they talk of their elemental selves on Freedom Ridge?" There was something strained and unnatural in his manner. His words were simple enough, but his tone was overbearing. Annette felt the angry color flushing into her face. She suspected that this was the aftermath of some misunderstanding between Linda and Everleth.

She glanced at Linda and knew that Everleth's tone had not escaped her, but she stood before them very quiet and very gently self-possessed.

"I ain't even right sure what an elemental self is," she said in her low, unhurried voice.

"Please *don't* say 'right sure,' Linda!" Everleth said in a sharp undertone, almost against his will.

A deep crimson rushed into Linda's cheek, and she put her head up suddenly and sharply. For a moment she stood there silent in the uncertain candlelight, tensely, imperiously commanding Everleth with her eyes.

"I — I beg your pardon," he stammered, his own face crimsoning; "I don't know what I'm saying. My nerves are all on edge this afternoon."

Linda regarded him a moment longer. Then she spoke. Her words were perfectly distinct, and she made no effort to half-whisper as he had done. "You know, Everleth," she said, speaking carefully and a trifle precisely, "I am doing my best to learn to speak properly, but, of course, I forget and make mistakes all the time — it is only natural that I should, for I was raised — brought up — in the back woods, and not the Back Bay — and — " suddenly the color leaped vividly in her cheeks and her

eyes flashed — "and I thank God I was!" she said. For an instant longer she stood looking at him, with her brilliant, flushed face, then she turned away, very tall and very graceful, and held out her hand to Miss French. "Good night," she said; adding, "Are you coming now, Annette?"

Annette rose a little uncertainly, dazed by the swiftness of the climax. While she was taking leave of Miss French she overheard Everleth apologizing to Linda in a quick, agitated undertone.

"Forgive me, Linda! I was a beast — an idiot! Say you forgive me!" he cried.

And heard Linda answer in an aloof voice, —

"Of course I forgive you. I reckon you spoke before you thought, heaps of people do that — only, some way — I had n't thought *you* would."

CHAPTER XX

Linda and Annette walked home rather silently through the cold, gray dusk of the February afternoon.

"I think the exhibition was really very successful," Annette ventured once, but receiving no reply she glanced at Linda, and saw that the girl was staring straight in front of her with sombre, unseeing eyes. She made no further remark, and in silence they came down Beacon Hill, cut across the Public Garden where the shrubs and trees stood very still and cold under their burden of snow, and struck into the Avenue. It was very cold. Their breath went away into the atmosphere in silver clouds of vapor; under their feet the dry snow creaked with every step, and the wheels and runners of passing vehicles cut through it with almost a shriek.

Once Linda said — speaking as though hardly conscious of her companion. "I recollect old man Leghorn — he's er neighbor of

ours down on Freedom Ridge — tellin' me once how he used to drive er supply wagon when he was just er young feller, from the Lost Flats, over the mountain clear ter Whitney's Lumber Camp, when it would be so cold the wagon wheels would cry through ther snow like er pack er hounds."

Her voice came out of the dusk, wistful and low, and, as always when she spoke of her home, she dropped back into dialect, and suddenly following the picture that her words made, Annette seemed to see before her very eyes the lonely figure of a man upon a high wagon-seat bent over with the cold, driving along the bleak, deserted stretches of a snow-covered mountain track. It gave her a sharp ache of pity for all the lonely, cold toil of the world. She glanced again at Linda, and again was conscious of her aloofness, and for some reason, as their regular footbeats fell in the creaking snow, their breath came and went in silver puffs, and they looked down the long twinkling vista of diminishing lights to the remains of a cold, red sunset in the west, she felt that a heavy depression paced on even steps beside them.

In silence they came home at last, and made their way upstairs to Annette's study. A fire was burning on the hearth, and Linda went over to it, holding out her hands, and shivering a little. There was an unnatural, tense repression about her, and Annette looked at her in some anxiety.

"Are you cold, Linda?" she said.

"Yes, I'm cold," the girl answered in low, restrained tones; "I'm cold, and" — suddenly the words came with a sharp rush almost as though they spoke themselves — "and, oh! I want my baby! I want to hold her close — right close up against my breast, an' to feel her little soft face right against mine!" She stretched out her hands with an eager, passionate gesture.

Annette looked at her aghast.

"Your baby, Linda? Your baby!" she cried, and stopped, her heart leaping into her throat. "Oh," she said after a moment, making an effort to collect herself, "oh, you mean Benny, of course, your little baby brother."

Linda put her hands up sharply to her face and shook her head.

"No, *not* Benny!" she cried; "my own, *own* little baby girl. My little baby daughter that's down in West Virginia waitin' for its mammy to come to it!"

"Oh, Linda!" Annette breathed after a moment; "oh, my dear, what do you mean!"

Linda stood back from her, her face curiously expressionless now, and her manner very still.

"I mean just what I say, Annette," she said quietly. "I've never told you — I never could, some way, though I wanted to all along. I reckon I'm funny that way — I can't tell things an' can't, an' can't — even if I want to — An' then, all at once, something sort of snaps inside of me, an' *then* I've just got ter tell!"

She paused a moment and then went on again in an expressionless voice.

"It was this way; I came home from ther woods one day, an' there was a feller — a man — leaning across the yard fence. It was Armstrong Decker, an' he wanted ter marry me. But I was mad, an' kind of frightened, too, I reckon, and I said, 'Of course I would n't marry him — of course I would n't!' But my father told me

I just had to, an' when I said I would n't, he knocked me down like I told you — an' then he told my mother if she did n't help make me marry Mr. Decker, he'd do something just awful to her, too, — An' he would have — I know he would — he's just a terrible man — an' she was scared, an' so — an' so — there did n't seem to be nothin' else for me to do but ter marry him. I was n't but sixteen, an' it was mighty hard to know what was right — an' I always did kind of like him anyhow."

"But you did n't marry him, Linda — you ran away!" Annette persisted blindly.

"I ran away afterwards," Linda said quietly. "And though I did n't exactly lie to you, Annette, I let you think a lie, an' I reckon that's really just as bad as straight-out lying, and — I'm mighty sorry about it. I married Mr. Decker," she went on after a moment, — "or, at least, I *thought* I married him, — an' I lived with him for almost a year, an' then," — she paused, looking down at her hands lying very still and tense in her lap, — "why, then, his other wife — his real wife — come up on the Ridge from one of the back counties, lookin' for him. An' so

then I just come — I just came away. "You see," she went on steadily in a moment, "down there on Freedom Ridge we don't know much except about the people that live in our neighborhood. Mr. Decker came up there, a stranger, to work at a sawmill that was cutting close to us, an' nobody knew him, an' did n't know nothin' about him 'cept that he was a mighty good hand to work. But after I'd been married 'most a year, my father and sister came to my house an' wanted me to come home because a new hand had come to the mill and said Mr. Decker had a wife living in another county, but I just could n't b'lieve it — I just could n't," she repeated slowly. "An' while we was talkin', Mr. Decker himself come home from the mill, an' I went up to him an' I said, 'Tell me God's truth, am I your wife?' An' he just put his hand on my shoulder an' looked straight down in my eyes, an' he said, 'Before God, Lindy, yer ther only wife I got.'"

She paused, staring at Annette with unseeing eyes. "Seems like I can see how he looked now — he's er big man an' his hair is kind of grizzled on the temples, an' his eyes looked right deep

into mine — I always kind of liked his eyes — an' — an' — I b'lieved him. But — the next day his real wife come along. . . . So I left," she resumed presently, "an' just tramped through the woods 'till you found me. An' I would have stayed with you then, only by that time I knew about my baby, and so when I left Mr. Crenshaw's, I tramped to Pritchard's Junction, an' went to the hospital there, and the doctor and matron was right good to me, an' let me work through ther summer for my bo'd, an' in the fall my baby was born."

There was a long pause between them.

At last Annette said, "Oh, Linda!" And after a long moment, "And you *never* told me!"

The tears rushed into Linda's eyes at the note of pain in Annette's voice.

"I wanted to — I wanted to, honest!" she cried in distress. "I knew it was n't doin' right by you, an' I felt awful to act that way to my best friend, but — but I was feared — I was afraid — to tell because I thought you might be angry and send me away, and it was n't just myself I had to think of — it was my baby. An' it's true, too, about things just gettin' locked

up tight inside of me, and my not bein' able to tell 'em, — 'specially if they're things that hurt. I reckon maybe it's because I did n't have any one to tell things to when I was little, so I just got into the way of lockin' 'em up tight inside of myself, an' facin' out whatever happened all alone. And there's another thing" — the girl's voice grew unsteady — "when I care about a person it's mighty hard for me to let 'em know how much I do care. Maybe you think I've taken all you've done for me an' not appreciated it — but it's all here" — she put her hands up suddenly to her breast, — "every kind look, every sweet word you ever said to me — everything — things you've forgotten long ago, I reckon, — they're all here — all stored up here — just forever and ever."

And Annette, looking into the deep, dark eyes, saw all at once the affection she had lavished upon Linda returned to her a hundred-fold.

"An' — An' I think you're the finest woman that ever lived," Linda said with a little, tremulous smile.

"Oh, Linda!" Annette cried in sharp protest, surprised and touched almost to tears.

It was characteristic of her generous nature that she had never once stopped to ask herself if Linda were grateful — indeed, in the distrust of everything that she herself undertook, she had hardly supposed there was anything to be grateful for, and now, confronted by the adoration and gratitude of Linda's eyes, she was overwhelmed.

"An' this evening," Linda went on, "I knew all at once I just *could n't* go on livin' a lie to my best friend."

"Why this evening?" Annette asked.

Linda shook her head.

"I don't know exactly, except maybe because it all seemed so funny and unnatural up at that exhibition — the candle-lights, an' the people all whispering, and everything; somehow I felt older than any one there. They all seemed sort of like children playing at being grown up, while — out in the world real things was goin' on. And then Everleth did n't like the way I talked — an' he's right, of course he's right" — she cried quickly — "but when life's really caught

hold of you once or twice in a sho' 'nough grip, why, it sort of shakes you out of yerself inter bigger things, and how a person talks seems a mighty little thing to bother about then. And I reckon it was because I wanted the real things that I knew all at once that the time had come when I just had to tell you."

"What is your little baby's name?" Annette said, after a long pause. She was still too bewildered by the overwhelming revelation to know what to say.

"I wanted her to have the prettiest name I could think of, and while I was tryin' to fix on one, it came to me all at once to call her 'Joy,' because when she got older I knew she'd have to — to know about things, and I wanted her to have her name to show her that right from the very first — in spite of everything — her mammy was glad to have her. I knew it was goin' to be terrible for her some day, an' then I thought her name would maybe make it easier — And, oh, Annette!" she broke off, her face suddenly illuminated, and her eyes stars, "I want to tell you all about it now — my baby's just every thing I am — every thing I

tried to learn, an' all the best things I've tried to be were all for her! — *all* for her! Why, it 's because of her that I'm here!"

"That you're here?" Annette questioned.

"Yes," the girl said softly, "I'm here, just tryin' to learn to be a mother. I reckon maybe you don't understand how it is, but when I felt my baby in my arms, it just sort of made me all over — I grew up, I reckon, then."

Suddenly she seemed to Annette, in spite of her almost childlike appearance, years older than herself, more deeply educated in life than she, and a certain humbleness crept upon the older woman.

"An' then I knew what an awful thing had happened to her. Of course I knew before, but it had n't hurt me for myself in the terrible way it did afterwards for her. And I just made up my mind then that I'd make up to her in every way that I could — in every way that a mother could — an' I was just so young an' so ignorant and all, it seemed to me I *had* to go some place and get an education — I had such a heap to learn before I could be a good mother. I just wanted to make the whole world over for my

baby, an' it seemed to me I had to commence with myself. And so that's what I've been doin' —" she rushed on, her eyes shining — "every new thing I learned, every new country you took me to, I learned everything I could about it — I put pictures of it away in my mind because there was a little baby girl down in the mountains, that would want to know by and by about all the things its mammy had seen. And every new word I heard I saved up for her — all the pretty words that you say to a person when you love them because we don't have so many words like that down in the backwoods, or we don't use 'em anyhow. An' so everything was for her all — *all* the time. All the pretty things, but, most of all, all the fine and good things — they were all for my baby!"

She paused, staring into the fire with an extraordinarily illumined expression in her eyes, and, gazing at her, Annette remembered suddenly that look of dedication in her face when she had first come to Boston — how she had dropped down upon the hearth and stretching out her cold, eager hands to the blaze, had cried, "I just want to be the kind of a woman a baby

would be proud to have for its mother — and — I'm goin' to be — if God helps me!"

"And so *that* has been your inspiration all along," Annette whispered at length.

Linda nodded, that soft, aloof look in her eyes, the look Annette had never understood before.

"Maybe you think it's a funny way to learn to be a mother," she said, "to come away and leave my baby, but, you see, I knew young, ignorant mothers were n't so much good to their children because — because my own mammy — poor little thing! — was that way. It was n't her fault, you know!" she cried, her voice quick with excuse and tenderness for the child-mother. "She was married when she was n't but fourteen, an' — some way — I always felt older than she was, and I know she never could do for us like she wanted to — though she always tried mighty hard, poor little thing! I always felt I had to stand between her and things — and it was on her account that I married Mr. Decker. But I wanted it to be different with my baby; I wanted her to have a mother that knows something, and 'll stand right betwixt her and anything hard that ever comes along."

"And is that friend of yours — that Miss Macey, is she looking after her for you?" Annette asked.

"Yes, but the baby is n't right at the hospital — she's with a mighty nice married woman down there that had a baby the age of mine that died just before I came away, and so she was mighty glad to keep my baby for a spell — an' she lives close where Miss Macey can see the baby often, an' see she's doin' all right. Miss Macey certainly *has* been good to me! She an' the doctor at the hospital both. They let me stay there until the spring working for my keep. — They knew I was goin' away to get educated and learn some sort of a trade, and they knew I'd pay the baby's bo'd then — but that woman — the one the baby's with now — did n't really care about the money — what she wanted was a baby to keep from missin' her own so bad."

"But won't it be very hard for her to give your baby up, Linda?"

"Not now it won't," Linda answered happily. "She's got a little baby of her own now, so she'll not care so much for mine — one's own babies are always the best," she added with a

little wise, whimsical smile. "And I was going to work somewhere soon — I was goin' to ask you an' Miss Mary about it — so I could have Joy with me; but *now* I won't have to because I'll be married in the spring an' can have her anyhow then."

Annette caught her breath, appalled. For a moment she had forgotten that Linda was engaged to Everleth.

"Linda," she said, mustering her courage, "have — have — you told Everleth everything?"

"I have n't told him anything yet," the girl answered.

"Oh, Linda! but you must! you *know* you must!"

"I know I must, and of course I will — of course I would n't marry him without telling him. I have n't been able to tell him yet — but there'll come a time when I'll be obliged to tell him — just as I was obliged to tell you this evening — and I reckon it'll come soon now."

"Everleth may — may not want to have the baby with you, Linda," Annette stammered, and then broke off, overwhelmed by the change

in the girl. Her face had gone white and her eyes blazed.

"Not have my baby with me after waiting for all these years for her!" she cried.

"He may not want her," Annette persisted, though she was frightened.

"He will if he loves me," Linda said in sudden low, steady tones—"he'll understand about it. I want to tell him—I *want* him to know all about it. My love for my baby is the deepest thing in me—sometimes it seems like it was just everything I am—all my thoughts and everything, an' I want him to know all about it because I know he'll understand. He 's so fine an' good an' knows such a heap, he'll be *sure* to understand."

Her voice was very soft, and a sudden throb of fear shot through Annette at the look of utter trust in her face. Would Everleth French's love be big enough to stretch up to such a demand, she wondered.

CHAPTER XXI

A THAW had set in at last, and the snow which had lain upon the ground for weeks was turning now to muddy water and was rushing away down the sewers. The sun flashed upon the drops of moisture pendent from every overhanging ledge, and mirrored itself in the small puddles of the streets. Overhead white clouds moved across a clear, blue winter sky, and all through the city, beneath the rumble of traffic, was the musical whispered undercurrent of the dripping eaves. Though it was still midwinter, one knew that the earth stretched itself delicately all over under the sun's warm touch, and half awakened from its frozen sleep; and with this faint breath of spring in the air, one remembered that the earth was alive, and only awaiting a further call to show forth the fullness thereof.

There was an edge to the air, and a breeze was going which lent buoyancy and vivacity to the afternoon.

Linda came down to the embankment from Brimmer Street where she had been for a lesson in English literature. She was walking unconsciously, and was repeating a part of her lesson: "Landor was more handicapped at the outset with wealth and health than Wordsworth with poverty, or Hood with want and disease." Then her mind suddenly swung round to the lines she had just been studying —

"We are what suns and winds and waters make us,
The mountains are our sponsors, and the rills
Fashion and win their nurslings with their smiles."

Involuntarily, she stood quite still as the words broke upon her inner consciousness. One hand rested against the railing of the embankment, and her eyes looked out over the wide expanse of melting ice.

"'We are what suns and winds and waters make us,'" she murmured. "Well, I don't know that wealth did hinder him so very much — he certainly did know some true things — and more'n that he knew how to make you see the truth for yourself — and I reckon that's the main thing — not so much what a person says to you, as what they make you say to yourself —

what yourself tells yourself — that's what counts, I reckon — that's what a person ought to go by."

She put her head up delicately for the pleasure of sensing the wind upon her cheek, and her eyes sparkled. It was the day after her confession to Annette, and a heavy depression, born of the reaction from emotion, had hung over her all the morning, but now in the afternoon, as the earth stretched and drew breath under the promise of spring, her own personality awoke and took wings to itself. She began to walk faster and faster along the way, in the sheer delight of motion.

"If it keeps warm like this," she told herself, "that old peach tree of ours 'll be coming into bloom an' getting itself frosted like it always does."

Suddenly, vividly, almost as though before her very eyes, she saw the door-yard of the house on Freedom Ridge where she was born, and at the doorstep the reckless peach tree all in bright pink blossom — the peach tree that had been wont on windy nights to startle her awake with the tapping of its crisp fingers against

her bedroom window. And with the sight of the peach tree the little song of her girlhood came back to her —

> I am myself and the world is mine,
> Laughter and love and spring sunshine.

It sung itself over in her mind, and she walked to its beat. She turned off the embankment, and went along Dartmouth Street across Boylston. She was hardly conscious of where she was walking; she only desired, stirred by the hint of spring in the air, to walk faster and faster, and to get away from the all familiar beaten paths of her Boston life. It was one of those days when Nature intoxicated her, and when at home she would have fled to the mountains to work off her exuberance of spirit.

Thus, walking swiftly and happily, she came to a part of the city where she had never been before, a part where wide streets with houses that had once been nearly fashionable, cut their way through narrower dirty ones with squalid tenements on either side. And as she walked, wondering at this new country she had discovered, she suddenly beheld the Spider in front of her. He was really a little boy, but so weazened

was he, and so distorted by deformity from all that was normal and human, that involuntarily he suggested to her mind a spider rather than a child.

He emerged from a dirty grocery half a block ahead, and began a painful sidewise progress along the street dragging one foot behind him. In his shrunken arms he carried one or two bundles, which, though small, were evidently a source of extreme difficulty to him.

Linda slackened her swift, joyous pace, and walked slowly behind him, wondering if she might go forward and offer to help, but as she wondered he stumbled over a slight irregularity in the pavement, and in saving himself dropped one of his packages. A middle-aged woman who was passing at the moment hastened eagerly to his assistance.

"There now!" she cried in a benevolent voice, picking up the fallen package, and endeavoring to take the others from his arms; "there now, you let me carry your things for you — they're too heavy for you. You just tell your mother it's a shame to make a little cripple like you run errands."

The effect upon the distorted child was appalling. All his bundles fell to the ground, and, turning, he struck wildly at the woman with impotent, twisted hands.

"Git out er this, you old fool!" he screamed. "I'll teach you to come buttin' inter another fellar's business! I ain't no cripple! I'm just as well able to look after myself as the next fellar. And you jest git out er this! Git out! Git out!"

His eyes blazed, and he continued to beat at her furiously and ineffectually.

The officious stranger fell back in consternation and embarrassment.

"Why, you horrid, disagreeable little boy! Are n't you ashamed — are n't you ashamed of yourself!" she cried, backing away from the passionate onslaught, and put at last to absolute flight.

"Did you ever *see* such a horrid child!" she defended herself to Linda, as she caught sight of the girl's eyes upon her. "Why, I did n't do a thing but try to help him. But that's the way with cripples — they're always so peculiar." She was moving off as she spoke, but her words

were perfectly audible to the child, who, shaken and trembling from his outburst, was leaning now against a tree-box, his scattered bundles at his feet. As Linda looked at him his furious eyes dared her to recognize his weakness, and without offering to help, she passed on. But in the moment's glance at him she had seen, under all his passionate defiance, a baffled, desperate personality, fighting against frightful odds to keep his place in Life's procession, and suddenly the tears rushed into her eyes, blurring the sunshine of the day. She walked to the end of the square and then glanced back in time to see him, his packages recovered, turn into a desolate side street. After an instant's hesitation she followed, and came upon him presently seated in a squalid doorway. Looking out thus he appeared more than ever like a spider in a web.

Linda paused before him, meeting for a moment in silence the challenge of his fierce, unchildlike eyes.

"I've walked a long way, an' I'm mighty tired," she said softly at length. "Would you let me sit down on that doorstep and rest for a spell?"

He glowered up at her for a space, but all he saw was a slender lady, with the clear, sweet eyes of a child, who looked down at him appealingly as one asking a favor, and at length he moved grudgingly to one side and made a little room for her.

"I guess you kin, it's my doorstep," he said ungraciously.

Linda sat down with a little sigh of content.

"I certainly am obliged to you," she murmured.

"Gee! that ain't anything," he returned, the defiance of his expression relaxing a little.

They sat together in silence, the strange spidery child of the city, and Linda Stillwater, of Freedom Ridge, both staring out at the narrow, dark street with its melting piles of dirty snow, and listening to the steady drip-drop of the eaves.

"My name 's Linda Stillwater, and I come from Freedom Ridge," Linda said after a time.

He looked at her askance, and then turned his sombre eyes back to the deserted street. But after a moment he stole another look at her. There was no hint of pity in her manner, and

her remark was just a simple one that might be made between any two normal human beings.

"Where's that?" he said reluctantly, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Freedom Ridge? Oh, it's down South in West Virginia, up on one of the highest mountains down there."

He pondered her words a little.

"I never seen a mountain," he admitted at length. "I never seen anything but this old city."

"But it's a very nice city," Linda hastened to reassure him.

He made no immediate reply, but after a time, in a more friendly tone, he said, "My name's Edward Pring, and I'm ten years old."

"Ten years old," Linda mused. "Why, I've got a little sister just about that old."

"Then she ain't little — ten ain't little!" he retorted.

"Of course it ain't little; that is, it ain't little for a boy — of course girls are different."

"That's so, and I guess it is little, too, for some kids, but I'm the boss of our family, and that makes a fellar older, I guess. My father's

dead, and my mother 's sick so 's she can't work, and I have to keep hustling to look after her and the kid."

Linda turned to him quickly. "The kid? Oh, have you got a baby in your house?" she cried. "Oh, I certainly would like to see it!" Suddenly her eyes were full of tears.

The Spider saw the surprising tears, and dropped his own eyes.

"Say, you come with me," he said, struggling to his feet, "and I'll show him to you." He pushed open the battered door, and Linda followed him into a dark and poverty-smelling passage, at the end of which he pushed open another door, and waved to Linda to enter.

"Mother," he said, "here's a woman wants to see our baby."

In the small, dingy kitchen a woman sat by the stove, propped up in her chair by pillows.

She turned her head sharply and looked at Linda out of baffled, suffering eyes. "What do you want with the baby?" she challenged.

Linda went quickly across to her.

"Oh, I'm sorry — I did n't mean to disturb

you," she cried. "It's just that — that I like babies, an' I have n't seen one for so long," her voice fell wistfully. "But I'm mighty sorry to trouble you. Your — your —" she checked herself just in time to keep from saying "little boy," and after a moment's hesitation gave the spider child the pronoun to which the man of the house is always entitled — "*He* told me I might come in," she said.

The mother's eyes softened at the small courtesy.

"I'm sure you're very welcome," she said. "Only please excuse the looks of things. I've been too sick to clean up, and of course a man don't know so much about them things — though I will say, Eddy's better 'n most," and her sad eyes paid tribute to her son.

The baby in the mean time, a person of about a year and a half, had unrolled himself from a box-like bed by the stove, and come toddling over now to embrace the Spider's legs, and vehemently endeavor to kiss him.

The Spider disengaged the clinging little arms, and limped over to Linda, holding out the baby's hand.

"Here, kid, speak to the lady," he commanded. It was plain to see who was the master in that house.

Linda stretched out two eager hands, and the baby, after standing back a moment at gaze, with round, questioning eyes, and moist finger on lips, at last toddled uncertainly forward, and permitted himself to be gathered into Linda's arms. He was a pale, ill-nourished child in a dirty frock, but he was a baby, and Linda held him close. He was still sleepy, and presently, when Linda seated herself in a chair that the Spider pushed up for her, he permitted his head to fall comfortably back against her furs, while his fingers played dreamily with a bright chain about her neck.

"Why, he seems to take to you all right," the mother said, with pride in her voice. "He don't often let strangers fool with him."

After that they sat in a pleasant companionable silence, and watched the heavy eyelids sweep down over the baby's eyes. Presently Linda began to sing softly — the little foolish song that used to put Benny to sleep.

"Where you goin', buzzard, where you goin', crow?
Goin' down to the low ground, where de wind don't blow —
Wind don't blow, wind don't blow —
Goin' down ter the low ground ter jump Jimmy-Crow."

From outside there came the occasional roar of an elevated train which shook the whole small kitchen, but inside the forlorn room was a drowsy peace, and a pleasant feeling of companionship, which required no conversational explanations for its preservation.

The exhausted little Spider sank down on the baby's box, and permitted himself a little period of rest from the passionate struggle that his spirit waged in the prison of his body. The mother watched Linda with a faint, peaceful smile, and in the presence of the girl's absolute simplicity and naturalness, it seemed only a normal occurrence for a strange lady to appear suddenly with a desire to play with the baby.

At last the Spider forced himself to renewed activity.

"It's time you had som'pum to eat," he announced fiercely to his mother. Dragging him-

self to his feet he went over to the stove and essayed painfully to lift the heavy tea-kettle to the front. At his second ineffectual attempt, Linda started forward to help, but was arrested by a quick, imploring gesture from the mother. For a moment the two exchanged a deep look behind the Spider's twisted back, and in that long look they entered into the pitiful woman's friendship of understanding.

"Ed, he just 'tends to everything round the house since I've been sick," the mother said in a brave voice.

"You certainly are lucky to have such a handy son," Linda contributed, and the other answered with a quick, tremulous smile.

"I'm mighty sorry you're sick," Linda said presently, her slow, soft words warm with sympathy. "How long have you been so?"

"Oh," the head turned wearily on its pillow, "for more'n a month, I guess."

"What is the matter — what does the doctor say the trouble is?"

"I ain't had no doctor."

"*Doctors* ain't no kind of use!" the Spider broke in with sudden bitter vehemence, jerking

angrily at the kettle. "They mauled *me* round something fierce fer two years and you *know* they never did me a speck of good! Gee! I'm done with *them!*"

He did not turn round, and again the woman's eyes sought Linda's to be sure that she understood.

"But, still, a doctor might be able to help your mother," Linda ventured.

"I'm jest done with the whole *nation* er doctors! I jest don't b'lieve in a darned one of 'em!" the Spider returned, his voice shrill with passion.

It was growing late, and Linda rose with a start, remembering that she was some distance from home.

She laid the sleeping baby back in his box bed, and turned to the mother. "It was mighty kind of you to let me come in — may I come again some day?"

The woman looked up at her as she stood sweet and tall and strong beside her.

"I'd be glad, I'd be awful glad to have you come again," she said, with a faint sigh of pleasure.

The Spider ceased his struggle with the tea-kettle and turned around.

"I'll see yer down that old passage," he said. "It's awful dark fer strangers."

Before she opened the street door Linda turned to her small escort.

"It's mighty hard on a man when his women folks are sick," she said diffidently; "won't you let me come over some day soon and help you about things — it ain't right that you should have to fool with woman's work all the time."

Suddenly he put out a frightened hand in the uncertain dark and laid it on her arm.

"Is she much sick?" he whispered.

The defiance and fierceness were gone, and all at once he was a delicate, frightened child struggling with a burden far beyond his strength.

"She's been this way fer *so* long — an' I told myself and told myself that I could hold out, but — Gee! I don't b'lieve I *kin* now. An' — an' — our money's most gone," his voice fell a little with terror, "an' I'm so tired, I don't b'lieve I *kin* hold out fer much more."

He leaned his head against the wall in utter, weary defeat.

Linda's arm stole round his neck. "Honey," she said, "it is n't any wonder you're all worn out — anybody would be."

"Would anybody be?" he begged. "Would any fellar who — who was big and strong be?"

"Why, of course, they would! Why, I don't think so very much of great big folks. Half the time they don't stand up to things like the little ones."

"But — but — I ain't *jest* little, I'm all crooked, and — I know it." There was all the hurt of his ten years of deformity in those three last, low-spoken, unchildlike words.

Linda made no answer save with the warm, close pressure of her arm about him.

"You be sure to come ergin soon," he said, at length, straightening up.

"I will — I certainly will," she promised.

CHAPTER XXII

Linda sped home on winged feet through the gathering twilight of the streets. She felt curiously restored to herself, as though for years a part of her had been lost, and now was found again. That short period while she had sat with the Pring baby in her arms, and let her eyes wander around the kitchen with its familiar furnishings had brought back something from the past, and had given to her spirit a sense of tranquillity and assurance like the peace of home-coming.

At home she found Miss Mary and Annette sitting over the tea-table with Everleth French. She nodded and waved her hand to them and then ran upstairs to take off her outdoor things, reappearing in a few minutes clad in a light tea-gown which was cut slightly low in the neck, and made her look very young and slender.

"Where have you been, Linda?" Everleth demanded. "We've been quite anxious about you."

Linda did not reply immediately, but faced

their inquiring eyes with a little radiant smile upon her lips.

"The world's coming alive to-day, is n't it?" she said, slipping into a deep armchair. "It seems as though you could feel it stretch itself all over."

"Oh, you mean the thaw?" Miss Mary said. "Yes, it seemed to me there was a touch of spring in the air, but these sudden jumps of the thermometer are very trying, I think."

Linda looked at her with puzzled curiosity, and Annette smiled inwardly at the realization that what had evidently made Linda's whole being awake, had been to Miss Mary merely an unpleasant change in temperature.

"But where have you been all this time?" Everleth persisted.

"I've been over in a strange part of the city, playing with a strange baby," Linda answered, and then went on to tell them of the Spider and his family.

"But of *course* they must have a doctor!" Miss Mary broke in energetically. "You can't let a woman die, perhaps, because of some ridiculous notion on the part of an eccentric child.

I'll telephone to Dr. Bainbridge the first thing to-morrow morning; he has charge of that district. Of course you can't pay any attention to that child's morbid idea about doctors."

"No, I suppose not," Linda agreed reluctantly. "Only — I hope that Dr. Bainbridge is a good man," and she thought of the fierce, tragic little spider defending his citadel so passionately.

"He's a very clever practitioner," Miss Mary said firmly.

"Is n't that one of the Johnson Bainbridges?" Everleth inquired.

"Yes — Mr. Johnson Bainbridge's second son."

"That's one of the oldest families in Boston, Linda," Everleth said.

An irresistible flash danced in Linda's eyes.

"Well, of course, that's a mighty nice thing to be," she said, "but I don't know as that 'll make him any better able to handle that poor little child. I'll go over in the morning — maybe I can help."

Miss Mary had rustled off upstairs, and now Annette also excused herself.

"I don't want you to go back over there, Linda," Everleth said when they were alone.

She gave him a quick, surprised look.

"But I must — I must go, Everleth!" she cried.

"But why? They'll have the doctor in the morning, and the district nurse, and of course they're both trained workers and can do much more for them than you can. And I dislike very much the idea of your going to such places. It's all right for older people, and of course I approve of social work, but I think it's quite wrong for young girls to attempt it, their lives have been too sheltered —"

Linda laughed involuntarily. "But, Everleth, that's just it," she broke in with a quick gesture, "my life *has n't* been sheltered — you are always forgetting that."

"I want to forget it," he muttered.

There followed a little space of strained silence.

"But I've got to go, Everleth," Linda pleaded, in a moment. "I've *got* to go — I promised I'd come back. You don't understand, but I think I can help them a little, and,

anyhow, *that's* the kind of life I understand, it's where I feel I sort of belong, and it's not right for me to turn my back on it, particularly if I can be of any use. Why, I'd feel I was being disloyal — was n't taking my part in the kind of life I was raised to. It's what I know — just the plain, simple, working life; and sometimes you're glad to get back to it. I don't reckon you'll understand, but if you've been used all your life to hard work with your hands — to sweeping, and cooking, and milking, and tending babies, an' all like that, why, you can't help missing it. I don't say that's the best kind of life, an', of course, if you're terribly poor and are sick it's awful, but if you've been used to work with your hands all your life, you do feel kind of lonesome without it."

"Then, am I to understand that the reason you want to go back to this wretched family is because you think they may let you wash their dishes for them?" Everleth said, a hint of disgust in his tone.

Linda colored, but answered steadily, looking straight at him: —

"That's partly the reason, yes, but it's not

that altogether; it's because, too, over there I think they need me a little, and I can do things for them, while *here*" — she swept a hand toward the luxurious room — "here everything's done for me, and — and if you're a woman raised like I've been, part of your pleasure in life is to work for other folks. Down on the Ridge almost all the work that the women do is *for* somebody — for their menfolks or their children, and — and — that's what I understand; and when I have a chance to do it, it sort of brings me back to myself. And then we — that mother and I — understood one another so well. We did n't have to say much. We just sat there together, and I held the baby and rocked, and yet, without her saying anything, I knew that, though she wanted a doctor, she'd rather suffer along without one than go against that poor little boy."

"But that's wrong — it's entirely wrong to humor him so!" Everleth cried impatiently.

"Maybe it's wrong, but — it's the way mothers do," Linda said softly.

"But surely, Linda," Everleth protested, "you can't mean to tell me you believe in pov-

erty — why, my child, that's the great evil that all the modern world is ashamed of."

"Oh, not terrible, grinding poverty, — of course I don't believe in that, — but I do believe in some work with your hands."

"Oh, well," he conceded, "some little handicraft, perhaps, but as my wife, dearest, you will be lifted above all that."

"You can *never* lift me above caring for the real and simple things of life," she cried passionately. "Oh!" she rushed on, her eyes kindling, and her cheeks beginning to glow, "it's freedom, it's all freedom to me, the feeling it gives me to know that I'm not dependent on anybody or anything — to know that even if I was put right down in the middle of the mountains all alone, I could look after myself, while you — why, all you city folks are dependent on somebody else for something all the time. All this" — again she swept her hand dramatically toward the elaborate furnishings of the room — "is pretty, an' mighty nice to have if you don't let it get into your soul, but you all don't know, I reckon, what a fine free feeling it gives you to know you ain't dependent on one er these

things — that you own yerself an' yer own soul, an' that you could be as happy down in the mountains with er tin wash-basin an' er dogwood twig for er toothbrush, as you are with all the lot of wash-fixin's that er person has in the city. That sort of feelin' sort of sets your soul free an' makes you happy, an' — an' makes you want to dance" — she laughed with sudden excitement. "Oh, I want to dance!" she cried; "I must dance — some way I have n't wanted to since I left home, but it's different to-night — to-night I must! Wait!" she cried; "wait, and I'll show you!"

She flitted excitedly over and turned out all the lights so that the room was lit only by the fire — "It'll make it more like out of doors, more like moonlight," she murmured, and caught up a black lace scarf that Miss Mary had let fall. "Oh, it all comes back to me!" she cried softly.

Everleth regarded her in astonished curiosity, and he thought he had never seen her look so beautiful; but she was too absorbed to notice his admiration. She stood poised on the edge of the wavering firelight, the scarf draped across

her white dress and falling from her outstretched arms like black wings.

"I never had any music," she murmured almost to herself, — "only the singing that is inside of your own heart when you are happy."

She straightened up almost on tiptoe, light and airy and graceful. "I am a cloud shadow," she began in a sort of low chant, "a cloud shadow lying deep and black on the painted mountains in the blue fall weather. The cloud is very still, just swaying a little — it is asleep — asleep." (She stood almost motionless save for a faint quiver that rippled through the folds of the outstretched scarf.) "The mountains are yellow and red — gold and fire, because it is fall. The hollows are a deep misty purple. The mountains like to have the cool cloud shadows lie on them because the colors of the trees are so hot. Above is the sky with the deep white clouds on its blue bosom. It is all so still, so still — the whole earth is asleep in the fall weather. All her summer crops are gathered in, and she is happy and is resting. Then there comes from far away a little breeze high up in the air and

stirs the cloud and the shadow moves with it." (She began softly, noiselessly, to float down the long room, a delicate, illusive figure, half guessed at in the uncertain light.) "It moves softly at first, but as the wind blows harder the white cloud hurries across the sky, and the following shadow slips faster and faster down the mountain, until it swoops across the valley and over the next ridge and is gone."

Her descriptive words came faster and faster, as on buoyant tiptoe steps she fled down the room, her black scarf held out, and her pace quickening lightly, fleetly, until at the climax of the cloud movement, on swift, silent feet she floated out into the hall and disappeared.

In a moment she came back, a little breathless, to the astounded Everleth, and turning on the lights again she tossed aside her black scarf. Though she moved quietly enough, there was a restrained, vivid excitement about her.

"There are heaps more dances," she said, a little thrill in her voice. "There is the wind rippling over a yellow wheat-field in the sun; and little baby foxes playing together in the woods; and our creek after a rain tumbling over

the stones; and dogwood blossoms blown by a spring storm; and, oh! a heap more!"

"But why have I never seen you do that before, you wonderful child?" Everleth cried breathlessly.

"I don't know; I reckon it's just because I have n't felt like dancing before."

"But — but it's wonderful — wonderful!" he cried. "I never dreamed you had such a gift of expression. You must take dancing-lessons. With a little practice you would be perfect. And you must come to the studio and dance for some people I know — they would love it!"

She regarded him in astonishment.

"But, Everleth, you don't understand — you don't dance *for* people. You dance when you are happy — when your own soul comes alive, and you can't help dancing!"

"I shall paint you as the cloud shadow," he mused. "But, no!" he broke off with a gesture of despair; "no, it is impossible! You can dance it, but I can never paint it!"

He went over and taking her hand kissed it almost reverently.

"Oh, you wonderful little creature!" he cried, consumed with admiration for her beauty, "I do not understand you — you are so wonderful, so different from what I have ever known." There was suddenly a wistful humbleness in his manner entirely foreign to his usual self. "Oh, my beautiful little love," he said, "forgive me when I don't understand; forgive, and teach me how to stretch up to your heights."

His sudden boyish reverence and self-distrust was very appealing.

Linda's face quivered with a quick sensitiveness. "Oh, Everleth! Oh, Everleth!" she cried breathlessly, deprecatingly.

He tried to take her in his arms, but she eluded him, and turned slowly away. She had grown very white and still, and all the fires of her elation had suddenly burned out.

"Oh, Everleth!" she cried in a low, hurried voice, "there is something I must tell you — something I should have told you long ago, God forgive me!"

He looked at her in surprise and tenderness, and tried again to take her hands, but she stood back from him very tall and very still.

"Wait! Oh, wait!" she cried. Then with a deep-caught breath she began —

"Everleth, when I was n't but sixteen, my father made me marry a man much older than I was, a man I did n't love. That is, I thought I was married to him, but after a year his real wife came up on Freedom Ridge, and that was why I ran away. Then it was Annette found me, but I could n't stay with her then, and so I left the Crenshaw's and went and worked at a hospital, and in the fall my baby was born. And then I came up here to Annette because I wanted all the very best for my child and I knew I was n't educated enough to raise her right."

Once started she finished her story without pause, and without emotion; and when it was done, she stood quite still looking at Everleth and waiting. The bald narrative seemed a tangible thing flung out there between them; and once spoken she made no effort to ameliorate it with words — neither qualifying, nor supplementing the bare statement.

A deep color had rushed into Everleth's face, and then ebbed slowly away, leaving it ghastly white.

"Oh, my God, Linda, that's not true —?"

"Yes, oh, yes, it is true — all true, Everleth," she returned quickly.

He put his hands up to his face with a stunned, bewildered gesture.

"Oh, Linda — Oh, Linda!" he got out brokenly at last. "And you would have married me without telling!"

"No, Everleth! No, I would n't!" she cried sharply.

"It is terrible — terrible!" he cried, a break in his voice.

He began to pace wildly up and down the room. Linda stood very still, her hands clasped in front of her, and watched him in utter silence. Once he paused before her and cried out at her still face.

"But don't you *see* how terrible it is! Don't you see — How can you stand there so still!"

She did not answer at once, and he cried again hysterically, "But don't you *see*, Linda!"

She drew a deep breath.

"Yes, oh, yes," she said slowly. "I reckon I've seen all along how terrible it was — it was me it happened to, you know, Everleth."

He did not seem to hear her, and turned sharply away. "It is awful!" he muttered. "I can't bear it — oh, I can't bear it!"

"There've been a heap of things I've thought I could n't bear," Linda said slowly, speaking more to herself than to him, "but when I saw I just *had* to bear 'em, I always found I could."

She looked at his distraught face a moment more, and then her expression softened. She sat down on a sofa and spoke to him almost as one speaks to a child.

"Everleth," she said softly, "if you'll just come and sit down for a little bit, maybe I can tell you how it was, and that may make it easier for you."

And compelled by her strength and quietness, he came presently and sat down beside her.

"You think I have n't treated you right — and maybe I have n't — but I want to tell you everything. You know," she began, after a moment, "I was just raised 'way off in the mountains, and never had much education or saw anything much until Annette took me abroad."

She paused, waiting for his reply.

"Yes —yes, dear, I know," he said brokenly, compelled by her waiting look. And uncertainly he put out his hand and took hers.

"And so," she went on, "I'd never really met any men of education — that is, not really to know them — until I met you. I reckon," she said wistfully, "you don't really know what a man like you would seem like to a girl raised like me. It is n't your money or any of those things that I care about, but you see you know such a heap, an' — an' — you look at life kind of different from any man I ever knew —"

"Oh, Linda, don't!" he cried in sharp humiliation.

"I want you to understand," she persisted gently. "I reckon I was kind of dazzled to think a man like you would care for a little backwoods thing like me. And then, besides, that day when you asked me to marry you, it all took me by surprise, and the snowstorm and all made me feel kind of reckless and not like myself; and all my old life seemed so far away I sort of forgot, and I said I'd marry you before I really remembered that I ought to have told you everything first. And then afterwards it —

it was hard to tell, and so I kept putting it off, but I never would have married you without telling." She paused. "I'd be mighty glad if you'd believe that, Everleth," she said.

"I believe you — of course I believe you," he said dully.

She went on then in that low, steady voice and told him of all the circumstances that had led up to her marriage with Decker. He sat through it all with his head buried deep in his hands and did not look at her or speak.

"I know I have n't acted right by you, Everleth," she concluded humbly, "and I ask you please to forgive me."

He was silent for a long moment. Then he said with an effort: —

"I forgive your not telling me — of course I know that was hard, but — oh, Linda! the other — That you should have let yourself be married to such a man!"

"*Let* myself!" Linda cried sharply. "Oh, Everleth! you don't understand! I told you I was forced into it — my father forced me by threatening to do something awful to my mother

if I did n't — you don't understand, you can't understand, of course, raised the way you've been, what sort of things can happen away in the mountains like that when a man is mean to his family — and my father *is* a mean man — an' I was n't but sixteen. I ask you to forgive me for not telling you, Everleth, — but not for the other, that was not my fault," she said quietly.

And after a long pause Everleth took her hand and raised it to his lips. At first he could not bring himself to speak, but at last he got out — "I do forgive you — I understand you could not help it, but — but, my God! It is awful!"

There was a long silence between them. Linda leaned back against the sofa cushions looking very white, but at length her eyes lighted and her face grew tender.

"Oh, Everleth," she whispered, with a little breath of relief, "I've wanted you to know all along. I've wanted you to know about my little baby, and about what she means to me. She is the most beautiful, the most wonderful thing — in all the world" — she could not go on for a

moment. "She — she is just all I am," she said softly at last, hardly above her breath.

Everleth stirred a little impatiently, but she did not heed him.

"I care so much," she said, "that I want you to know all about her — I — sort of want your sympathy, and to have you care for her, too. My telling you about her is — is like my taking something out of the very depths of my heart and trusting it to your hands to hold. You see — I've wanted so to tell you all about it — that's the reason I came to Annette so I could get an education and learn a trade and make a good home for her — but now it won't matter," she added with a little happy burst, "*now* I can have her as soon as we're married!"

Everleth started to his feet.

"But — but, good God! Linda, I'm not going to have that child live with us!"

Linda's whole face changed in a flash. All the softness, all the appeal vanished, and her eyes were terrible. She, too, rose to her feet.

"Not have my child after I've waited for her all these years!" She laughed. "I reckon you don't know what you're saying, Everleth!"

"But I do — I do know what I'm saying! Of *course* I won't have that child with us! Why, what would people say — how could you explain?"

"Explain to people!" Linda cried. "Why, I'd tell the truth — It's awful, of course, but I did n't do anything wrong — I married Armstrong Decker to save my mother, an' — an' I'm not ashamed of it!"

"Oh, Linda!" he cried, and began again to pace the room furiously. In a moment he came back and stood before her.

"What you ask is absolutely impossible," he said; " I don't see how you can expect such a thing for a moment — how you can ask it!"

Linda was very quiet; the mantle of stillness that always descended upon her in moments of great emotion had fallen now.

"It would not be impossible if you loved me, Everleth," she said.

He turned upon her angrily.

"If *I* loved you!" he cried. "If I loved you — it's because you don't love me — don't consider me that you can ask such a thing!"

She put up her head suddenly and sharply and looked at him with startled eyes.

"You don't love me!" he cried again. "You can't love me and yet ask such a thing."

She still looked at him with her head thrown back and that sudden startled look in her face. Something seemed to be dawning slowly upon her.

"Why, Everleth," she said slowly, as though dazed, — "why, maybe you're right — maybe I don't love you, — but it's God's truth I thought I did."

"You don't love me!" he cried sharply, arrested by her words. He had made the statement in anger, not for a moment believing it. "Then you've been playing with me all this time — you've been fooling me!"

She continued to look at him bewildered by the revelation.

"Why — maybe I have fooled you, Everleth. But I fooled myself, too."

"Then it's true — you don't love me?"

"I thought I did — but now — Oh, Everleth, forgive me!"

"But now?" he persisted.

"Oh, I thought I cared," she cried in distress. "Oh, Everleth, I did n't know until this moment that I did n't; if I fooled you I fooled myself as well."

"You have wrecked my whole life," he cried, his voice husky with passion. "Do you hear? With your fooling yourself, and your fooling me, you have wrecked my life!"

"I did n't know — all this life is so new to me — it's hard to see straight," she pleaded; "and so — and so I made a dreadful mistake — I thought you were different."

"And what did you think I was?" he demanded.

She looked at him a moment in silence and then said softly, "Why, I thought you was the finest man I'd ever seen —"

"Were — *were!*" he cried sharply, mechanically, "not, 'you *was*'!"

She put her hands suddenly up to her face and broke into hysterical laughter.

"Oh, that's it!" she cried; "that's just it, I reckon! I was so foolish I thought you were big enough not to care how I spoke or where I came from, but to care for the big sure 'nough

things of life; that — that was my mistake, Everleth."

She drew off the ring he had given her and held it out to him. But he had sunk into a chair, his face buried in his hands, and did not see. She stood a moment holding it out to him, and then, laying it quietly on the table at his side, she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XXIII

"So it is all over," Annette wrote with relief in her journal. "The door is fast shut upon that episode. Everleth has gone abroad, and Linda has gone South for a visit to her child. After all, I might have trusted her real self to come to the rescue in time. She spoke of it to me just once. 'If it had n't been for my baby I would never have known my mistake until too late,' she said, appalled, 'but somehow, when my love for her comes over me, everything 's all different, all changed — I see the truth then. It was terrible my thinking I was in love with Everleth when I was n't. And — and it was terrible, too, that he could n't make the sacrifice for me. He wanted to — but his love was n't big enough. I always thought if you loved a person there would n't be anything you could n't do for them, and — it kind of hurts to find out love is n't as big as you thought it was.' This is the only comment that she made when she told me of their broken engagement.

But though she says nothing, I know the thought of it *does* 'kind of hurt' — it hurts her to think love is n't as big as she thought it, and it hurts her very terribly, too, to think that she was mistaken, and that all along she had not loved Everleth."

Linda returned from her visit South and settled down once more to her studies. It was arranged that she should stay on with Annette, finishing the courses she had undertaken that winter, and then go South for the summer to be with Joy, and the next winter Annette and Miss Mary were to try to find some work for her by which she might support herself and her child.

A month had passed since that freakish spring-like day that had appeared in mid-January, when Linda had discovered the Spider, and thereafter, moved by a desire for the truth, had told her whole story to Everleth French.

There had been almost a week of heavy cold weather, made up of rain and sleet and fog when even Miss Mary was glad to stay indoors and go over her accounts and make up reports rather than go out to committees.

Linda was seated by the fire in Annette's study sewing. At her desk Annette was rustling through the leaves of a manuscript.

"I've worked and worked over this story," she cried at length in whimsical despair, "and it has about as much red blood in it as though it were written by a paper doll —Oh, Linda, why was I ever born into the world!"

Linda glanced up from her sewing, and gave her a quick, affectionate smile, but she made no comment.

Miss Mary caught sight of them and came in for a moment on her way to her own neat little office. Annette's sitting-room was not scrupulously tidy, but it did achieve an air of comfort and leisure that was undeniably attractive. Miss Mary regarded leisure as a demoralizing factor in existence, and when she did permit herself to indulge in it she always felt that she had let down the bars of self-discipline almost as much as though she had taken a drink.

"What are you making, Linda?" she inquired, her eye caught by the girl's work, which

appeared to consist of many little bits of bright calico.

"I'm piecing a quilt," Linda returned. "The women at home are apt to take this kind of weather for sewing their quilts." She held up a square of pink and white blocks. "This is what we call the 'log-cabin' pattern. My mother pieced a quilt like this before she was married; I used to have it on my bed at home."

Miss Mary examined the little cut squares of calico, unaware of the rather wistful look in Linda's eyes, and as usual her comment was perfectly frank.

"Dear me! what a waste of time!" she exclaimed. "Think of cutting up material just to sew it together again!"

Linda flushed and dropped her eyes.

"We never thought it was a waste of time — down on Freedom Ridge we used to think they were pretty. I pieced two quilts the winter I was — But I reckon you're right," she broke off, and with a sudden movement, she swept all the bright pieces together and flung them into the fire.

"Oh, Linda," Miss Mary cried; "oh, that's

too bad! I did n't mean you should do that!"

"There's no good doing a thing if it's a waste of time," the girl said. "I don't exactly know any more what is worth while and what is n't. I suppose I've let go of one kind of life, and have n't really got hold of the other yet."

Annette was struck by the remark, and she also guessed that the hint of self-distrust in the girl's tone was born of a remorse for the mistake she had made in believing herself in love with Everleth French. As usual her mind strayed off into a long argument for and against the transplanting of personalities.

With Miss Mary, however, it was different. Linda's remark struck her as well, but she did not lose herself in a maze of speculation over it. With her, once a fact was established, the next thing was to act upon it. This time her line of action was almost an inspiration.

"Linda," she said, "have you been over to see the Prings lately?"

"Not since I came back from West Virginia."

"Because that poor little boy is ill now. Dr.

Bainbridge telephoned me that he had asked Dr. Greenough to look in on him to-day, and as he's a new doctor and that child has such a curious antipathy to doctors, I thought you might smooth things over a little for them — though I hardly suppose Paul Greenough will have any trouble, he seems to have a special knack with children."

"I'll go right over there now," Linda said, her face lighting up.

"But I did n't mean you should go out in such weather. I think it will do if you go to-morrow," Miss Mary objected.

"Or take a carriage, Linda," Annette suggested, emerging from her speculations over the transplanting of personalities.

"Oh, I never mind weather when I have something to do," Linda returned happily.

Outside, battling with the wind and sleet, though it was cold and slippery, her spirits rose with the joy of conflict, and she was full of life and abounding vitality, her cheeks like moist roses, when she knocked at last on the Spider's door, and turned the handle in answer to Mrs. Pring's "Come in."

She stood a moment on the threshold looking into the dark little kitchen, and no event of her after life ever quite obliterated the scene from her mind.

Mrs. Pring had recovered, but the Spider had succumbed to the strain of being man of the house. It was he who occupied the big rocking-chair now. His little claw-like hand lay in that of the new doctor who sat beside him, and the baffled weary defiance of his face had given place to one of utter trust and confidence. The doctor was writing something on a little pad on his knee, and his face was turned in profile to Linda, but she knew him on the instant. With a great sweep of utter astonishment she knew it was the man she had encountered in the West Virginia mountains, the man who had been watching the pink moccasin flower. At the realization, her whole being leaped within her, and then fell to an absolute stillness and peace. She had a curious feeling that she had suddenly come into the rest and tranquillity of port after a confused tossing voyage through the dark. Paul Greenough did not look up at her entrance, so intent was he

on his prescription, and Linda waited quietly in the doorway. A smile had leaped into her eyes and curved her lips delicately, but she stood there just looking at him, perfectly still and perfectly happy, not attempting to make her presence known. She saw again the kind, whimsical mouth, and bright, brown eyes that had looked into her own, as they sat together in the spring woods.

"There now!" he cried at length, and tearing the written prescription with a jerk from the pad, he looked up, and his eyes met Linda's.

"Howdy," she said softly, still smiling happily at him, and sending the little mountain word of greeting to him across all the years between.

At the sound of the sweet, slow voice, he jerked his head up in quick surprise and looked at her intently.

"Why — why, it's Lindy!" he cried, starting to his feet.

She nodded, the smile deepening on her lips. "Yes, it 's Lindy," she answered simply.

And then suddenly they both laughed. It

was so right, so altogether natural, that they should be facing one another once more. But after a moment he relapsed again into astonishment. Coming quickly over, he caught both her hands in his, shaking them a little, more as though to arouse himself than in greeting.

"*You*, Lindy?" he cried. "Why, Lindy, *you!*"

"Yes — just me!" she laughed.

And then he laughed, too, in spite of himself.

"Why, of course — of course, only — Why, you dryad! What are you doing here? You belong down in the mountains in a dogwood tree — no," — he was laughing with excitement — "no, I remember it was a sugar maple — and you belong to the spring!"

"But spring 'll be here d'rectly," she reminded him.

"An' it 's mighty damp in er sugar maple when the sap commences to raise in the spring," he laughed, quoting her very words.

"I don't talk like that now," she flashed back, her eyes dancing.

"Oh, don't you!" he mocked. "Oh, Lindy,

Lindy, you can't talk any other way and still be you!"

She laughed outright at that. "Well, I just reckon that's the truth," she admitted happily.

"Well, I just reckon it *is*," he retorted.

There was no self-consciousness or formality between them. As they had met in the simplicity and freedom of out-of-doors, so now they picked up the dropped friendship from that point in utter naturalness, and their spirits seemed in perfect accord even as their hands met.

"And is your name still just Lindy?" he asked, after his bright, dark eyes had studied her for a moment.

"My whole name's Linda Stillwater."

"Why, of course, it would be Linda Stillwater — I might have known that," he cried, looking down into her deep shining eyes,

> "'Her eyes were deeper than the depths
> Of waters still'd at even,'"

he quoted, half under his breath.

"Why, that's from the 'Blessed Damozel,'" Linda cried, proud of her knowledge.

But he flung her hands impatiently aside. "Oh, Lindy, Lindy! Have you learned things?" he cried. "Have you acquired an education? Don't tell me you know anything about Boston."

"Well, I do know something about it," she amswered honestly. "But I don't know so very much else — honestly I don't — honest!" she cried, seeking to reassure him.

"Well — maybe you don't," he condescended. "And now," he added, "I'm going to see you home. You shan't escape me this time. Where is your present sugar maple?"

"It 's on Commonwealth Avenue," she admitted a little fearfully.

"Commonwealth Avenue!" he groaned. "Oh, Linda! Honey, what *have* they done to you!"

To have him call her "honey" gave her a little thrill of delighted amusement. How clever of him to remember that little playful word which is so repeatedly on the lips of mountain-folk.

Paul turned back to the Spider, and took the limp, hot little hand again into his.

"You're not very comfortable, are you, old man?" he said, his voice warm and sympathetic.

"I'll telephone round to the nurse to come in and put you to bed as soon as possible."

The old rebellion and defiance leaped into the Spider's eyes.

"I ain't goin' to let no strange woman fool with *me*," he cried petulantly. But under the petulance was a piteous, frightened appeal.

Paul leaned quickly toward him, putting his arm about the crooked shoulders. "What's the matter with my doing it, then?" he suggested gently.

The Spider studied the face above him for a long moment, and then, with a little weary sigh of content, said, "Well —" and let himself be gathered up in the doctor's arms.

Afterwards, when Paul and Linda were walking home together, Paul said, "That little child's spirit is getting too big for his body, Linda; it'll outgrow it altogether, — very soon, now, I think."

And Linda answered, "Yes, I know," softly, for she had been startled by the change in the Spider and was not unfamiliar with death.

But after a moment the doctor glanced down

at her whimsically, his eyes noting her smart raincoat and dainty umbrella.

"And the last time we saw her she was dressed in a little blue calico frock, and she had on a slatted sunbonnet," he laughed.

She looked up suddenly, vividly, into his face.

"Oh, I'm *glad* there's somebody remembers how I used to be!" she cried.

He caught the wistfulness of her tone and responded to it quickly.

"How you used to be? Why, you know you have n't really changed a bit."

"I'm glad," she said again, with a little breath of relief. "I've been afraid lately that I was getting to be somebody else."

They walked on through the dusky streets a little way in silence, and then all at once Linda found herself telling him her whole story. How it came about she never knew exactly, for he had not questioned her, but for some reason, secure in the absolute certainty of his perfect understanding, she began, shyly at first, disjointedly, and then, bit by bit, she told him everything. He made no comments, and he offered no audible sympathy, but in the gathering

dusk he put out his hand and drew hers through his arm, and once or twice when her words stumbled a little and she stopped to steady her voice, he put his hand quickly over hers with a close, understanding pressure.

So at length they came to the Whittemores' doorstep. The rain and sleet had ceased, and before that sombre day fled into night it had the grace to build up sudden golden sunset clouds out of the heavy gray ones.

CHAPTER XXIV

The next afternoon Paul Greenough came to call. He did not talk particularly to Linda; indeed, he talked much more to Annette, and Miss Mary when she came in. They had always known him, and their families had been friends for generations, so the conversation flowed easily and pleasantly along over a variety of topics, of things and people.

Linda sat a little to one side, saying almost nothing, her hands folded lightly in her lap, and her whole being very still, save for the quick glance of her eyes resting now upon one speaker and then upon the others.

It was wonderful to her to sit there and listen to this friend of hers, to find him as capable of discussing literature and music with Annette as he was of talking district nursing with Miss Mary. She did not want to say anything herself, she merely wanted to sit there a little aloof from it all, content in the warm security of his presence, feeling occasionally the touch of his

glance upon her, as he included her in the conversation, and knowing all the time, deep within her, that though he might talk to Annette and Miss Mary, it was because of Linda Stillwater from Freedom Ridge that he had come.

The days that followed seemed to her afterwards almost tangible, things that were warm and living and golden; poignant with sound and sight and touch. Things that one might almost catch in the hands, holding them fast, and pressing them up against the face in sheer delight in their reality. Yet at the back of her mind she knew always that these golden days were strung together upon a thread of fear, though what the fear was, she hardly knew.

In the knowing of Paul Greenough, Linda seemed to awake, to come into a fuller consciousness. She, the silent, almost inscrutable child of the mountains, became all at once the talkative, the eagerly communicative. All the stored reserve of her nature, all its silences, at the touch of his understanding sympathy, broke their barriers suddenly down, and rushed forth in an eager flow of confidences. She became alive and articulate. In the long walks they had

together, he never sought to force her reserve, and he never spoke much himself, his being the gift of listening, but with her vivid words, and often only half completed sentences, she laid before him the whole picture of her life; all her childish wonderings and dreams, and all the hidden, still places of her spirit, to which even Annette, with all her affection, had never found the way. "Why, I never told any one *that* before!" she paused often to say in deep surprise at herself. In giving him her confidence she seemed as well to be revealing herself to herself. "Someway, telling you seems to make me know my own self better," she said constantly.

She was awakening, and coming for the first time into a realization of herself. It was like the bursting into bloom of a white moon flower, which all through the day has remained resolutely closed to the sun's allurement, but which at the approach of the still dusk begins a slight delicate trembling, and then all at once, with incredible swiftness, bursts into full miraculous flower. And as the moon flower gives all its exquisite stored perfume unreservedly to the

night, so Linda opened wide the treasury of her heart and gave it in utter confidence to Paul Greenough.

The remembrance of that time always remained to Linda in a series of sharp pictures, and vivid scraps of remembered conversation, always with the remembrances of how Paul had looked, how he had smiled, what he had said. Such simple episodes they were, for the most part, yet all so deeply a part of her whole being. There was, for instance, that afternoon he found her taking a long walk in the Fenway and brought her home in his motor. It was raining a little, a gentle, misty, spring shower. They did not find much to say as they went noiselessly along the wet streets, but she was extraordinarily keyed up and happy. The simple fact of swift motion was an extravagant delight, as was the feel of the damp air meeting them with a rush, and the occasional little gusts of soft rain dashed in fleeting showers against their faces; and the sight of the grass-plots growing faintly green, and the flashing past of rows of yellow daffodils, and the pink and blue of hyacinths, all looking indescribably

alert and gay in the gray rain were little occasions of miraculous happiness. And then, when he stood a moment beside her on the steps, he had drawn an old notebook from his pocket and said, "Look, Linda!" opening its leaves to show her the faded pink of a pressed flower, together with some yellowed petals that she guessed were dogwood blossoms.

"Do you know what they are?" he questioned.

"Are they — ?" she said, and faltered, not finishing her question.

"Yes, Lindy, they are — the pink mocassin flower" (he remembered that the mountain name was "moccasin flower" rather than "lady's-slipper") "that the bee was in, and the dogwood petals that came down all over your hair and your blue dress. Oh, Linda, Linda! Why did you run away from me that time? I came back and looked and looked for you."

"I'll — tell you why some day, maybe," she said.

Again there was the week when the little Spider died, when his passionate spirit strug-

gled free of its distorted prison at last, and when Linda had seen all of Paul's tenderness and sympathy revealed, and when, too, Paul had seen Linda in a new light. When he had seen her, in spite of her youth, a strong, sweet woman who took gentle command of the distracted little household, doing the work, looking after the baby, and sustaining the Spider's mother with infinite tenderness.

"You have seen death before?" he asked in surprise at this strong, quiet Linda.

"Oh, yes, my mother, and a little sister and brother, and anyway you know down in the mountains all the neighbors take a hand when anybody's sick. I can hardly recollect the time when I began sitting up with sick people."

It showed her to Paul as older than he had imagined her. "She is only a child in the artificialities of life," he told himself; "in the real and deep experiences she is a grown woman." And on the day that she told him all about her child he knew this to be more than ever true. She had told him about her from the very first, but now she went a little further and told him

all that she had dreamed and planned for her future, showing him, all unconsciously, how her baby's advent had shaped and made over her whole life, and how utterly she had dedicated herself to her. And as he listened, watching her rapt little face, it seemed to Paul as though in her shy, slightly hesitating words, and slow, quaint phrasing he was listening to a veritable poem of motherhood, something so deep and so exquisite that he hardly dared touch it even with his thoughts.

She looked up at him as she finished. "It's — it's nice to tell you things," she said shyly, "because I'm always so sure you'll understand. With other folks, so often words just seem to set up a kind of fence between you and them — the more you try to explain, the higher the — what you might call the barrier grows, but with you — why, it's different."

They were standing together in one of those little recesses on the piers of the West Boston Bridge, and were looking out upon the tumbling blue spring waters of the river. Below them the Harvard shell with its flashing oars was tossing up and down. Across on the embankment the

grass was a delicate green, and the shrubs were beginning to show a faint foliage.

Paul put his hand over hers as they rested on the gray masonry.

"Do you know why it's different with us, Lindy, honey?" he asked softly. "Do you know why words can never make any barrier between us?"

She looked up at him, a quick, fleeting glance. "I — I reckon I do," she admitted just above her breath.

His hands tightened sharply upon hers and he bent closer to her, but she drew herself quickly away. He saw the color fade a little in her cheeks and realized that for some reason she was frightened.

The fear in her eyes checked the words that had rushed to his lips; and in silence they moved slowly on, walking down toward the sunset with the lapping of the water in their ears, and overhead the sweet expanse of spring sky flecked all over with white clouds.

But Paul was disquieted. In spite of all this happy understanding he realized that something troubled Linda. What it was he did not know.

It was the one thing that she had not confided to him. It gave him a vague dread that these golden days of companionship were really the halcyon days between storms. He told himself that, because of her unfortunate engagement to Everleth French, she shrank in self-distrust from a second too hasty wooing, and he tried to hold himself in check, but there came at last a day when it seemed no longer possible for him to keep silence.

It was late in the afternoon, and they were sitting together in the Whittemore drawing-room. The spring had come, sudden and warm, and the windows were open, the curtains blowing faintly and softly back and forth in the breeze. The room was in twilight, and seemed very peaceful and remote from the hurry of the outer world, and all at once Paul took Linda's two hands close into his, and, looking down at her and half smiling, said, —

"Linda, you know that I love you."

It had seemed a thing so utterly sure to him from the very first, so safe and so inevitable, that he was overwhelmed by the look of terror that leaped into her eyes.

"Wait! oh, wait!" she implored, and drew her hands sharply away.

"But, dearest, why should I wait? — I've been waiting to tell you ever since that very first day down in the West Virginian mountains."

"Oh," she faltered, "it — it scares me!" And her face was white, and her eyes wide and tragic.

"Dearest! what is the matter?" he cried, consumed with tender concern.

"Oh," she breathed, "the friendship is so wonderful — it's just so wonderful like it is now — don't let's ask more of it — it seems to me like a wonderful bright bubble, that'll break if we ask too much of it — Oh, Paul!" she pleaded, "can't we stay a little longer just in the friendship?"

She looked up at him in the dusk, fear and love in her face, and a wistful, eager pleading that he could not resist. He gazed down at her a moment in silence, and then, kissing her hands, released them.

"Very well, little sweetheart," he said, "we will stay a little longer in the friendship."

But later, when he was taking his leave, she suddenly put both hands up and drew his face down to hers and kissed it.

"Good-bye — dearest!" she breathed, and fled away up the stairs before he could stop her.

CHAPTER XXV

EARLY the next morning Paul Greenough, returning from the house of a desperately ill patient where he had spent most of the night, and where in all probability he would have to spend many more sad nights, let his runabout coast easily down Beacon Hill, and running along Arlington Street turned into the Avenue. His face looked grave and tired. He had been fighting for hours with all his soul, and all his medical skill, against pain and death. The battle was neither lost nor won, but the dawn had brought a little respite, and in this respite all the depression bred of fatigue, and of anxiety over Linda's manner of the afternoon before, rushed upon him. He did not understand her terror, and all night long, while the surface of his mind had been acutely engaged with his patient, the undercurrent of his thoughts had sought apprehensively to find some reason for it. From the very moment that he had lifted his eyes to hers in the Spider's kitchen he had felt secure of his

love for her, and it had not seemed possible to him that it could be otherwise with her. He tried to force his mind free of his sombre speculations, and bring himself to appreciate the sparkle of the morning's freshness, but he could not shake off a morbid feeling that Linda was like some enchanted princess — wholly beautiful, wholly desirable, but having withal certain mysterious prohibitions, which, if one disregarded, would mean the inevitable disappearance of the princess.

It was still so early that the streets in that part of the city were almost entirely deserted save for an occasional chore-man cleaning some flight of steps. But presently Paul's attention was arrested by the figure of a woman a square or so in front of him. She was walking very fast, in spite of a bag which she carried, and which was evidently heavy, for it dragged her slender figure slightly over to one side. As he drew nearer he was struck by the desperate haste of her manner. She was almost running along the empty streets. He was struck, too, by the quaintness of her blue suit, which was old-fashioned even to a masculine eye; also there

was something vaguely familiar about her, and as he came abreast he glanced down.

"*Linda!*" he cried sharply, and stopped his machine so quickly that it ran against the curb.

She gave a great gasp of surprise when he cried her name, and her bag fell to the pavement. She stood quite still saying nothing, her white, frightened face turned up to his, the fallen bag at her feet, and her hands twisted tight together.

"Linda!" he cried again, leaping down beside her. "Why, Linda!" Mechanically he stooped and picked up her bag. "Why, where are you going at this time in the morning?"

She looked helplessly about her from side to side, as though seeking some escape.

"I — I did n't expect to meet you," she said confusedly.

"Where were you going?" he demanded again.

"To — the station."

"The *station!* What for?"

"Why to — to take a train," she answered in a low voice, averting her eyes.

"To take a train where? Where were you going — what do you mean, Linda!" he cried.

She looked up at him for one frightened, fleeting moment.

"I — didn't know exactly where," she faltered.

She dropped her eyes again and stared down at her locked hands. In the open sunshine of the street, clad in her shabby little outgrown suit, she stood there before him singularly defenseless and appealing. And though she was so still he saw that she was trembling faintly all over.

His own hands shook as he turned away and dropped her bag into the runabout. He drew an extra coat from under the seat, and held it for her.

"Put it on," he said gently; "it 's sharp this morning."

In a daze she obeyed him.

"Get in," he added, his steady, tender hand upon her arm compelling her. When she was seated he tucked the robe carefully about her.

"Folks who don't know where they 're going had much better stay at home with their friends," he said; adding, "Oh, Linda! Linda!" reproachfully.

They slipped along Dartmouth Street to Boylston, and thence past the riding-school to the Fenway. She did not speak, and he did not attempt to question her until they came at last to a little secluded spot in the park where there were no passers-by to stare at them. Here he stopped the runabout and looked down at her.

"Linda," he said, "you were running away."

He felt her tremble, but, not attempting to deny it, she nodded her head, still staring straight in front of her.

"But why — why, dearest?" he cried.

"Well, you see — you see," she stumbled, "it all came over me last night how ignorant and all I am, and not good enough for you —"

"*Linda!*" he cried sharply; "not good enough! Gracious Heavens —"

"Oh, but it's true — it's true!" she rushed on. "You're so good and so clever, and everyone says you'll be a great doctor one of these days, and — and they say you belong to one of the best families in Boston," — in spite of herself a little forlorn smile twitched her lips here, — "An', you see, I don't belong to no kind of

a best family nowhere, and I'm mighty ignorant —"

"Linda!" he cried vehemently again and tried to stop her, but she went swiftly on, not heeding him.

"And so I thought if I just got my baby and went away somewheres where no one could ever find me, maybe you'd forget —"

"I would *never* forget, and you know it!" he cried. But suddenly he checked his vehement outburst and looked searchingly down at her. "Linda, you don't think — you *can't* really think — that our having been brought up differently can come between us? You're not telling me the truth. Linda, look at me," he commanded, "that's not the truth, is it?"

She gave him one of her quick glances and then looked away.

"No, it's — it's not the truth," she admitted in a low tone. "I wanted to lie, but — someway — I can't tell you anything but just the truth."

"Then, what is the truth, dearest?" he questioned gently.

"It's not really that; of course, I know I'm

not like the women folks you've been used to, but I could learn, I know I could, — I'm learning all the time, — and when — when you love a person, you learn a heap quicker — and I know you don't really mind that much anyhow —"

"Of *course* I don't mind it!" he cried passionately, "of course I don't! I never think of it — that is nothing between us — I only know you are the dearest, the most beautiful, the most desirable woman in all God's world!"

The tears leaped into her eyes and she averted her face, her lips quivering.

He put his arm about her and drew her little trembling figure to him.

"Tell me the real reason, little one," he begged, looking down at her.

"Oh, Paul! Oh, Paul! you must know what the real reason is!" she burst out with a little sob, as she struggled away from his embrace. "It's because of all that's happened to me. I've tried and tried to think I was n't to blame for it — that it was because I was so young and was forced into it, and all — but I *was* to blame, I know now I was! I did n't love Mr. Decker,

and I ought n't to have let anything on earth make me marry him, but — I just did n't know nothing about love then — but now I know, and I know it's my disgrace and I ought n't to let you share it. I ought just to take my baby and go away somewhere."

"Oh, Linda — oh, Linda!" he cried brokenly. "*Don't* say such things — don't ever *think* such things —"

"But it *is* a disgrace," she went on blindly, "I never let any one know how I felt about it — I even sort of played to myself like I did n't care — but, oh! I did care! It hurt all the time — deep down inside of me — it kind of made a sore place in my soul that even my thoughts could n't bear to touch."

She was crying now, shaken all over with the sobs she fought to check.

Paul could not trust his own voice to speak, but he put his arm about her again and drew her passionately close.

"But — but —" she struggled on after a moment. "The things that just happen to yourself don't really matter so much, — you can stand them all right, — but when you love

a person, and you think" — she gave a little sharp gasp — "oh, you think maybe what's happened to you will hurt them — why, then you think you'd better just go away somewhere out of their life."

"Oh, my dearest!" Paul groaned.

"But it is terrible for you," she persisted feverishly checking his outburst. "When I told Everleth, he was so shocked he could n't bear it; he said just over and over, did n't I see how terrible it was!"

Paul made a furious, inarticulate sound. "I am *not* Everleth French, Linda," he said sharply.

"But he was right. I know now he was right. I did n't think he was — I could n't see I was to blame for what had happened then — but I reckon that was because I did n't really love him — love teaches you a heap of things" —

"Then you do love me, Linda," he interrupted swiftly.

"Yes — oh, yes! that's just the trouble," she cried. "If we could just have stayed in the friendship, I should n't have had to go away; but after yesterday it seemed like I just *had* to go —"

"And if I had been five minutes later I should have lost you!" he said, appalled. "No!" he broke off. "No! you could never have found a place in all the world where I should not have found you! Oh, my dear —" he paused steadying his voice a moment. "My dearest, don't you see that we *belong* to one another out of all the world in spite of all that 's gone before? Don't you see that the only terrible thing could be our losing one another?"

He was holding her hands and looking straight down into her little pale, upturned face. "Don't you *see?*" he persisted.

"It would be the only terrible thing for me — but — but for *you*, Paul? You have such a heap of other things in *your* life —"

"Sweetheart! There is *nothing* in my life but you!" he cried.

She still held herself away from him, her dark eyes looking deep into his.

"Paul," she said at length, a little tremor in her voice, — "I love you — oh, just with all my soul! — but — but even for you I can't give up my baby."

"Oh! my darling! My little child! Is *that*

it!" he cried. "Oh, my dear, could n't you have trusted me not to ask that? Not to wish it for a moment! Do you think, Linda," he said, looking straight down at her, "that I can have known you and loved you all these weeks and not realized what your child was to you? Oh, my dear! All I ask is that you will let me love her too — let me help you give to that little girl all that your heart desires for her!"

She looked at him for one long incredulous moment. Then the color flooded into her cheeks, her soul leaped into her eyes, and with a little sharp sob of gratitude, she hid her face against his shoulder.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE next week Paul had to go to Washington to attend a medical convention at which he had promised to make an address.

"And promises have to be kept, I suppose, even when dryads have come to town," he said ruefully to Linda.

In those first weeks of May, spring rushed upon the city, the weather turned almost hot, and everywhere through the Back Bay was the stir and flutter of exodus. Already many houses, with their shuttered windows and barricaded doors, stared blankly upon the streets, and most conversations opened with, "And where are you going this summer?" followed by such remarks as, "Oh, to be sure! I forgot you had a place at Cornish. We sail on the 21st — yes, Cunard line — oh, yes! *we* always sail from Boston. No, I don't really know where we're going after we get over on the other side. — Don't you wish there was an entirely new

Europe? Of course, there *are* places one has n't been to, but they 're apt to be pretty uncomfortable, don't you think?"

Linda felt this stir of departure as she made her way home from a visit to Mrs. Pring, though Savoy Street was certainly not suffering from the expectation of a sea change. There life was just as permanent, and just as crucial, in the spring and summer as in the winter, the only change being the awakening of the occasional trees, and the spilling forth into the streets and little parks of the population in kaleidoscopic crowds, and perhaps as well that subtle, hidden change of heart which sometimes comes in spring, and to attain which it is not necessary to cross the ocean, but which is, nevertheless, more extraordinary than even a new Europe would be.

Linda walked eagerly along the streets. It was hard to have Paul away, but his letters were almost worth the separation. Except for the reports of her baby, which the matron of the hospital sent her every two weeks or so, Linda had hardly received, all told, a dozen letters in her life, and certainly none of them had in any

way prepared her for those miracles of letters, so mirthful, so wise, so tender, which found their way to her every afternoon, just when tea was over, and before one went upstairs to dress for dinner. With them in her mind, she ran eagerly up the Whittemore front steps now, though it was still too early in the afternoon to expect that magical last delivery.

There was as yet none of the disorder of departure in the Whittemore household. Annette and Miss Mary had a place at Nahant, from whence the latter found it easy to come into town and attend to all the different summer charities which claimed her attention, but they never went there before the first week in June. Linda found Miss Mary serenely engaged with the "Transcript." Annette was in New York, visiting friends, and catching up with some of the new plays which had failed to come to Boston during the winter. The windows of the drawing-room were wide open, and it was cool and pleasant there, with the perfume of lilies-of-the-valley in the air, a fragrance which always brought her own home mountains vividly back to Linda, for she and Lidy knew sequestered

spots on Freedom Ridge where these flowers grew wild.

She sat happily down to await the postman and to hear an account of Miss Mary's busy day, which, Annette being away, Miss Mary reported faithfully to Linda.

It was near the close of this recital — to be exact, it was when Miss Mary said, "And then, just before coming home, I ran in for a little peep at the anti-tuberculosis exhibit" — that Linda caught the sound of the postman outside, and her polite attention wavered and ran off the track. She heard him come all the way up the steps, heard the sharp rattle of the brass flap as it fell into place again, and then heard his retreating steps, and knew that the letters lay in a little scattered white heap out there on the hall-rug. She was too emotionally reserved to run out and gather them up; besides, it was the parlor-maid's duty to come out of the dining-room where she was setting the table for dinner, and, picking up the letters, to bring them in to Miss Mary. This she presently did. Waiting with her whole soul alert, Linda heard her open the dining-room door, and heard the

swish of her skirts go down the hall. One shoe squeaked a little. Only that morning Miss Mary had said that she really was afraid she *must* speak to Susan about that shoe. Then the maid appeared in the drawing-room and handed the letters over to Miss Mary. One swift glance was enough to tell Linda that there was nothing from Washington for her, and her tense expectancy relapsed with a little quiver into disappointment, and she sat silently watching Miss Mary shuffle the letters over.

"Oh, here's a note from Annette! That's a report from the Day Nursery — how stupid of them, they've already sent me one! These are just circulars —"

Then Miss Mary paused, puzzling over a cheap bluish-white envelope.

"Mrs. Armstrong Decker," she read, making out the faint penciled address with difficulty. "Who in the world is Mrs. Armstrong Decker?" she laughed, "and such an extraordinary handwriting, too. They've made a mistake in the number, of course; here, Susan, put it out on the hall table, and give it to the postman in the morning."

Miss Mary had never heard the name of the man to whom Linda had supposed herself married.

Linda sat absolutely motionless in her chair. Her whole happy, spinning world had cracked suddenly to pieces and, as always in the face of any overwhelming disaster, her impulse was to be perfectly still, not to wince or move; above all, not to cry out.

Strangely enough, the first sharp emotion which emerged out of the dizzy chaos of her mind was an acute resentment against Miss Mary's amusement over the name and the handwriting on the envelope.

"Decker is n't any funnier for a name than Whittemore," she was conscious of saying angrily to herself. "An' I reckon, if she'd lived all her life in the backwoods, she would n't write near as well!"

But she continued to sit very still in her chair.

Miss Mary rose briskly.

"We are going to have dinner early to-night, Linda," she said. "I've promised to visit a boys' club in the North End, and must be there by half-past seven."

"I know, I'll get dressed right away," Linda answered.

But she spoke in so strange a voice, and her face had gone so white, that Miss Mary regarded her in some anxiety. Then, remembering suddenly that Linda's usual letter from Paul had failed to come, she touched the girl's shoulder affectionately.

"Why, you know, Linda," she said, "letters often get delayed coming from the South, so that they miss this last delivery, and we don't get them until the next morning."

"I know," Linda assented in a dead voice.

With a little farewell pat of sympathy, Miss Mary went off upstairs, and Linda was alone.

With an effort she rose presently, and went out into the hall, pausing there and looking about her. Behind the closed doors of the dining-room, she could hear Susan moving about. Miss Mary was upstairs in her own room, also with the door safely closed. For a moment Linda hesitated, then on swift, noiseless feet she fled down the hall, and catching up the limp envelope from the table, sped away with it upstairs to the safety of her own room. There,

with the door fast shut, she flung the letter down on her dressing-table, and sprang back looking at it, her eyes wide with a foreshadowing of horror. "Mrs. Armstrong Decker, Mrs. Armstrong Decker, Mrs. Armstrong Decker," she whispered the name over and over as it stared up at her in the cramped, illiterate scrawl. She had never seen Mr. Decker's handwriting, but she knew instinctively that this was from him.

At last she turned away and began slowly and mechanically to change her dress, her eyes coming back continually to the letter, and at last, when her toilet was complete, she took it up, still unopened, and thrust it deep down among the laces and knick-knacks of her upper drawer, but, after all, there was just a chance that in tidying the room for the night, the housemaid might open that drawer and discover it, and in the end she snatched it out again, and hid it in her frock.

All through dinner, Linda sat opposite Miss Mary, and responded dutifully to the latter's cheerful flow of conversation. She was quiet and composed, but with every movement she

made, every breath she drew, she was aware of the faint whispered rustle of the unopened letter rising and falling against her bosom. Immediately after dinner Miss Mary went off to the boys' club, and Linda was alone. She paced restlessly up and down the long drawing-room, — a trick she had caught from Annette, — always conscious of the letter, and conscious, too, that every moment brought nearer the time for its reading. She could not read it, she told herself, until she was all ready for bed, when she would have the comfort of the long dark in which to face whatever was before her, and for this she would have to wait until the maid had prepared her bedroom for the night, or else excite curiosity by retiring early.

But at length time dragged itself away, and there was no longer any excuse for delay. She went slowly upstairs, and locking her door, began as slowly to undress, the letter facing her once more from the dressing-table, and drawing her eyes perpetually to its terrible address. She felt so small and alone and frightened that she put off the perusal until she should have said her prayers. But somehow, when she knelt down,

her usual prayers would not come, and she could only whisper over and over, her head buried deep in her arms, "O God, help me! Dear God, help me for whatever 's coming."

And then, at last, looking hardly more than a child, the frills of her night-dress cuddled softly about her neck, the long black rope of her hair hanging down her back, and her eyes dark and tragic and frightened, she picked up the letter.

"To Mrs. Armstrong Decker," it began ceremoniously enough, "I will drop you these few lines to let you hear from me" — then suddenly, as though the spirit of the man leaped through the conventionality of illiteracy, it broke out, "oh, my little, little mistis." She flung the letter abruptly down, and turning, walked the length of the room, biting her lips hard — that was his old, tender name for her. But she came back again in a moment and picked it up resolutely. "Oh, my little mistis, that was a damned black lie that woman tole you. It's God's truth, like I said, your the onliest wife I got. I tole you that when you asked me. I aint never written to you before.

I knowed" — she had come to the bottom of the first page. She did not read on, but sat by the dressing-table staring straight before her, her whole being engulfed in the stunning realization of the one phrase which seemed to leap at her out of the past. "It's God's truth, you're the onliest wife I got." She rose at last and as in a dream turned out the light and crept into bed. There she lay a long time very straight and still, without moving, and with dry eyes. The one poignant phrase hung itself violently forth in her mind, and for some reason she knew unmistakably that what the man wrote her was the truth.

"It's God's truth," she whispered brokenly at length. "It's God's truth, I'm Armstrong Decker's wife." And then she buried her face among the pillows, and began to cry terribly and silently.

But after a long time she stopped crying, and turning on her side stared at the faint light from the open window. The streets were quiet now. The wind rustled every now and then at the curtains, and blowing in in warm gusts rippled the light covering over her body like the faint

touch of illusive fingers in the dark. In the silence and dusk of the room she seemed to be retired from the rest of the happy world to a place of utter disaster.

"I'll just *have* to go away somewheres now," she whispered, "somewheres where he'll never find me this time."

That was the one conclusion that showed straight before her. She was Armstrong Decker's wife, therefore she must drop utterly and forever out of Paul Greenough's existence.

At last, late in the night, she rose, and began her stealthy preparations for departure. She laid out once more the little old blue suit, in which she had first come to Boston, and began gathering together only the very few simple things that she felt she absolutely needed. She had a little money saved out of the generous allowance that Annette gave her. Indeed, she had over a hundred dollars, there had been so little that she desired that money could buy. It would be enough to keep her until she could find work somewhere.

"And I can work," she whispered, in a pathetic effort to encourage herself a little. "I

was always good and strong, an' I'll be *glad* to work now."

The letter still lay upon the dressing-table, and she remembered that she had not finished it. She picked it up now, and turning the page read on.

"I knowed you was with a rich lady, and I knowed she could do a heap more for you than ever I could, and I thought I would just stan back and let you go on. But now, oh, my little honey, I am a mighty sick man, and I would like powerful to see my wife ergin."

Then the man retired once more to the conventional ending of Freedom Ridge letters.

"It is gettin late, so I will come to a close, hopping this will find you in good health,

"Your respectful friend,

"Armstrong Decker."

But at the bottom were a few more blurred lines, —

"Do you recollect them Easter flowers I planted fer you? Theys all in bloom in the yard now."

The tears leaped to Linda's eyes and began to run down her cheeks. So he was still living

in the same little cabin on the side of Freedom Ridge! But in a moment her own tragedy rushed back upon her and, flinging the letter aside, she turned feverishly to her packing once more, murmuring, —

"I got to go! I got to go!"

But where she was going and what she was going to do she did not know. Save only that she must go South and get her baby, and then lose herself somewhere in the wide world, her plans were utterly vague.

Suddenly, as she moved about the room, the words of Armstrong Decker's letter leaped up in her mind.

"Oh, my little honey, I'm a mighty sick man, and I would like powerful to see my wife ergin."

"Oh, I can't!" she cried sharply, covering her face with her hands. "I can't go back there! I don't want ever to see him again! I can't forgive him! I — I reckon I don't *want* to forgive him — ever!"

Yet she dropped the garment she had been folding and, sinking down upon the edge of the bed, stared sombrely before her. And as she

sat there, all at once the face of her child, dimpled and soft and unutterably dear, rose before her eyes, and with it came the thought of Decker back there in the little house on Freedom Ridge, ill and all alone.

"And — and he has n't ever seen his baby!" she faltered. He was ill, perhaps he was dying, and — he had never seen his child — perhaps did not even know of its existence.

"But I can't go back! O God! How can I go back!" she cried again.

She loved Paul Greenough with all her soul, and she was leaving him. And now she seemed to see him looking at her, as he had looked a hundred times, tenderly, whimsically.

"Oh, my dear — my dear!" she whispered, and again her sobs broke forth, shaking her all over. But she put her hands up hard against her quivering lips and stared straight before her, and all at once she knew what was right to do. She was Armstrong Decker's wife, he was ill, he wanted her, and he had never seen his child.

"Oh, I reckon it's right for me to go back," she whispered brokenly. "An' I want to do

what's right," she added piteously, not knowing that she spoke out loud. She was not speaking to herself, she was speaking to that inward vision of Paul Greenough.

"He's sick, an' I'm his wife, an' he has n't ever seen his baby," she kept repeating desperately over and over. "It's right for me to go back, an' — an' oh! I must do what's right! must do it for Paul because," she whispered brokenly, formulating, half unconsciously, her ideal of love for herself, — "because when you love a person you want to make yourself as nigh perfect as you can."

From the very first love in one form or another had shaped Linda's whole existence. Her fierce, protective love for her mother had driven her into her marriage with Decker; her love for her child had sent her forth in quest of an education; and now, at this supreme moment, her love for Paul Greenough and her desire to perfect herself for that love drove her back to the man who was her husband, who was ill and alone, who had never seen his child, — that little living miracle who had re-created the whole world for Linda.

She rose at last, an utterly weary and broken little figure, and resumed her preparations for departure. She wrote a note to Miss Mary, and one to Annette, trying to make them understand. Then she paused for a long time, but in the end, her hand shook so, and the tears ran down her cheeks so fast, that all she could leave for Paul was Decker's letter, and one short pitiful line from herself.

"Dearest — you see how it is — you see I've just *got* to go this time."

The few things she meant to take with her were ready now, and she was dressed, but she kept on moving about the room, and setting it to rights, a little gray shadow of a woman going silently about in the faint light of the dawn. Somehow she wished to leave the room more than in order, more as though the episode of her life there were finished, and she found herself putting into drawers, tucking away in her desk, and secreting in the closet all the little odds and ends of personal belongings which had marked the room as hers. She was taking up once more her old self, her self of the mountains, and was laying away her new self,

the self that loved Paul Greenough, almost as though it were dead. At last it was all finished, and, taking up her bag, she stole downstairs and, unfastening the front door, let herself out into the gray chill and stillness of dawn.

CHAPTER XXVII

The next morning, after a day and night of steady travel, Linda alighted with her baby on her arm at Linden, the small flag-station, which was the nearest point on the railroad to Freedom Ridge. It had all been simple enough to arrange. In Boston she had caught the day train through to Washington, and there had taken one at night which brought her among the mountains early in the morning. Fortunately Pritchard's Junction was on the main line, an hour or so east of Linden, so she had only had to telegraph to Miss Macey to bring the baby to the station to meet her train. This the latter had done, and after a few moments of hurried explanation on Linda's part, and of directions on Miss Macey's, the train had moved on and Linda had her child in her arms.

Joy had been frightened at first, and had set up a wail at parting from Miss Macey, but it had never taken Linda long to win her way with any child, and it was not possible that her very

own could be unhappy with her for any length of time.

Yes, it had all been simple enough, but it had been very terrible as well. The wait between trains in Washington, with the thought that she was in the same city with Paul, yet might not even speak to him over the telephone, and the long night afterwards, when she lay broad awake in the swinging dark of the sleeper, were both terrible, and now, as the train swept away from her, leaving her upon the little platform, Linda looked about her feeling dazed and numb, as though she were in some frightful dream.

The day was exquisite with spring freshness and early morning light upon the purple mountains, and Linda knew in a dull way that she had come home, but her heart was too weary and too bitter to feel any elation in the fact. Her only source of comfort was the feeling of Joy's little hand in hers. Joy, being two and a half years old now, and of a decided turn of mind, had struggled out of her mother's arms and insisted upon walking.

Linda was still nine miles from her destina-

tion. She might have hired a team at the livery in the village, but she shrank from the companionship of its driver, and chose rather to walk the distance. Accordingly she set forth resolutely, howbeit, slowly, for Joy found much to engage her attention, and stopped often to investigate, and to ask persistent baby questions, with an enunciation which, Linda noted with a pang for the years she had missed, had almost lost its baby talk. They passed through the little village, which had hardly changed at all, and which had seemed to Linda's childish eyes such a wonderful place, and struck at last into the road leading out to Freedom Ridge. After a time Joy's little feet began to flag, her interest in the wayside flowers and birds died down, and, lifting her arms to Linda, she commanded, "Tote Baby," imperiously. And when Linda took her up, she fell almost immediately asleep upon her shoulder. And then Linda had nothing for companionship save the stretch of the winding, deserted road before her, and the feel of the baby's warm little body on her arm.

Fortunately about two miles beyond Linden

an old man, with a flowing white beard and slouch hat, overtook her in a ramshackly buggy.

"Ain't that a right smart of a load you've got to tote?" he asked, pulling up his old horse and leaning down to peer at her out of kind and faded blue eyes.

"It is kind of," Linda admitted, for she was beginning to realize that with Joy to carry and her bag, too, her strength would hardly hold out for the seven miles still ahead of her.

"You better git in an' ride er spell; I reckon I'm travelin' your way," he urged.

"Well, I certainly am erbliged," Linda said gratefully, and climbed in.

The horsehair was spilling out of the seat of the buggy, the harness was tied up with string, and the horse was old and raw-boned.

"It ain't much of a *con*veyance," the driver apologized, "but I reckon it beats walkin', an' I never *kin* stan' to see er woman walk when I'm er ridin'. How fur was you goin'?"

"Out to Freedom Ridge," Linda answered.

"Well, I kin set you down a mile from the top of ther Ridge, an' I reckon that'll help some."

"It certainly will," she said gratefully.

She settled Joy upon her knee, pulling her wee little sunbonnet down over her eyes, and prepared herself in some dread to be questioned by the old man. He seemed, however, to have no curiosity concerning her, and his conversation was of the simple, abrupt variety that required little answer, such as —

"It's been mighty wet for corn-plantin'." "Roads is pretty good, though." "See that there little ground-squirrel?" And so on, with occasional exhortation to the horse to "Git ap!" "*Git* ap, now!"

And Linda was left in peace to stare sombrely before her. But gradually, as the way grew more familiar, and as they passed one little well-known landmark after another, something seemed to be clutching at her heart, and beginning to melt a little of its hard bitterness. In the sunshine and perfume of the way, and in the song of birds among the zigzag fence-rows, her whole nature began to relax a little toward peace.

Little green fields stretched on either side of the road, with here and there a small house and stable-lot. The dimpled and shining valley lay very peacefully still between the mountains

which stretched wide arms protectingly about it. Here and there the pink of redbud trees was relieved by the white blossoms of dogwood and thorn and plum trees, and once they passed close under a crab-apple all in fullest bloom. Its delicate pink flowers were held high up against the vivid blue of the sky, and the air was intoxicating with its perfume. Linda caught her breath. "Oh," she cried, in spite of herself. "Oh, I have n't seen a crab-apple for years!"

"Is that so?" the man said in surprise, and, pulling the horse over to the side of the road, he cut a spray of blossoms.

"They just erbout matches Pretty's cheeks, don't they?" he said, holding the pink flowers against the sleeping child's flushed little face.

The touch half waked Joy. She opened her eyes slightly, clutched the blossoms, smacked her lips together a time or two in sleepy, baby fashion, cuddled herself limply and confidingly against her mother's arm, and fell deeply asleep again.

"Mammy's baby! Mammy's baby!" Linda whispered, with a rush of sharp affection.

And now Linda found herself beginning to watch the small activities of the way with a soft interest. Here was a man planting corn out in his field with his whole family to help him, and there a woman was busy setting out her tomato plants, and both the little homely sights brought back a sharp ache of remembrance to Linda. This was the life she had been brought up to, and it seemed to her, in each little infinitely familiar incident, as though her own home country were stretching out wide, unseen arms to welcome her, to gather her close upon its bosom once more.

A little farther on their way they came to a small ford where the horse reached eagerly at his bit, and the old man relaxed the reins obediently that he might drink.

It was the ford where Armstrong Decker had let his horses pause and drink, too, that night of their return from Linden, when the moonlit water had washed faintly through the wagon wheels, and when Decker had cupped his hand under Linda's chin, and, turning her face up to the white moonlight, had kissed her full on the lips.

At the foot of the Ridge the old man pulled up to let Linda out.

"You know your way, all right?" he asked; and she answered that she did and thanked him. He looked at her for a moment with his first hint of curiosity; he did not put it into words, however, but with a wave of his knotted hand, and a jerk to the reins, rolled slowly on his way again.

Linda and Joy went on together. The child was awake now, and again insisted on walking, though she stopped at every flower, and every white butterfly that drifted across the track, demanding each time in her clear little pipe, "What is it?"

"Say, What is it, mother," Linda commanded her once, and Joy obeyed, the unfamiliar term broken into two soft words on her lips.

Linda snatched her up and covered her little flower face with kisses. Whereat Joy broke into gurgling laughter and shouted, "Mo-ther! Mother!" over and over, as though the whole thing were a huge joke.

"Well, I reckon it does seem funny to you to think I'm your mother," Linda agreed,

smiling for the first time. "It seems right funny to me, too, sometimes."

Once they passed a woman milking her cow in a fence corner, and when Joy tugged at Linda's hand and pulled her over to witness this new performance, the woman laughed and filled a tin cup with milk and gave it to Joy to drink, and as the child drank, looking roguishly at her benefactor over the cup's rim, the woman smiled up at Linda, and said in the pleasant companionship of motherhood, "You've certainly got a mighty cute young 'un."

And Linda answered the look with a warm, soft smile.

"Her mammy thinks she's just the cutest thing in all the world!" she said.

They came, too, to the log school-house where Linda had gone to school, and there sat down to rest upon its deserted steps and to partake of a little repast of bread and butter that Miss Macey had put up for them. How many times in the past Linda had sat just there eating her dinner at the noon playtime! The school was closed for the summer now, but all its outlook was familiar. Here were the

woods sloping close down to it, where she and the other children had been wont to look for the earliest flowers in spring. Here was the well, and there the remains of a moss house built by some industrious little girl.

"Mammy 'll show it how to make moss houses," Linda promised Joy, pointing out the little play-house and forgetting the more sedate "mother" to which she had endeavored to train the baby a little earlier.

After their rest they went on again, and at last in the mid-afternoon, when the hot May sun was still high, they made the turn in the road, and caught the first glimpse of Armstrong Decker's cabin.

For a moment Linda stood perfectly still, something leaping in her breast and seeming to choke her. Then, her heart beating hard, and her senses a little giddy, she went resolutely forward.

She lingered a moment when she came to the spring under the maple trees where in times past she had been wont to place her washing-bench and tub, and as she paused there a woman carrying a water-bucket came out of the open

door of the cabin, and down the path toward her. For a moment Linda's heart stood still, and then went on with a tumultuous bound. The woman was Sarah Speedwell, a neighbor, whose cabin was half a mile or so away on the Ridge. She did not recognize Linda at once, but stood looking curiously at her for a moment after she had said, "Howdy."

"How 's Mr. Decker?" Linda asked at length.

"He's a mighty sick man," the other returned. "I've been sittin' up all night with him, an' I'm erbout broke down. He needs some one of his own to do for him mighty bad. I'm here as much as I kin be, but my children is needin' me all the time."

Holding Joy tight against her breast, Linda stood still for a long moment. Then, setting down her bag, she stretched out her hand quietly and took the bucket from the other woman.

"I'm mightily obliged to you for all you 've done," she said. "But you need n't to bother any more. I'm Mr. Decker's wife, and — I've come home."

"Well, my lands!" the other cried, starting back. "Why, if it ain't Lindy Stillwater, sho' 'nough! An' I never knowed ye — you've changed a heap."

Linda made no comment.

"I'm Sarah Speedwell," the woman went on. "I reckon you did n't know me neither."

Linda nodded. "Yes, I knew you," she said.

The other paused a moment on tiptoe with curiosity, but in the face of Linda's absolute stillness she could ask nothing, and presently she gathered herself together.

"Well, if you've come back, I reckon you don't need me no more, so I'll jist step along home, fer I expect that baby of mine's a-squalin' fer me this very minute — but Mr. Decker certainly does need somebody mighty bad."

"I'll see to him — I've come home," Linda repeated steadily and stood waiting.

Sarah Speedwell said, "*Well!*" — an ejaculation partly of surprise, partly of uncertainty, and then turning, moved off slowly down the road.

Linda stooped and filled her bucket, and as

she did so, her reflection looked back at her from the crinkled water as it had done hundreds of times in the past, only now it was an older Linda that looked up at her. Her breast was beginning to heave tumultuously, and the tears were aching in her throat. She straightened up and, with the bucket in one hand and leading Joy with the other, she went slowly up the path to the house. Everything was just as she had left it, and in the dooryard the spring flowers Decker had planted for her were all in full bloom. At the sight of them, the hot tears brimmed over and rained down her cheeks, so that when she entered the main room of the cabin she was crying.

"*Lindy* — honey! Oh, my God! Is that Lindy?" a man's voice cried wildly from the bed.

She stood still an instant, and then, setting down her bucket and dropping Joy's hand, she went swiftly over to him.

"Lindy — is it Lindy?" he cried.

"Yes — yes, it's me," she answered, and falling on her knees by the bed she put her head down beside him and burst into wild sobbing.

"Why, my little honey, my little honey," he said brokenly, and one of his big gaunt hands went uncertainly to her bowed head and tried to stroke her hair.

"Why, don't cry," he said soothingly. "Don't cry, little honey."

She struggled with the wild choking sobs, and after a moment she raised her head and looked at him.

"Oh, Mr. Decker!" she said. "Oh, Mr. Decker —" and could not finish. There was so much to say, that somehow she could say nothing. She glanced down at the bed, and was aware, half unconsciously, that it was covered with one of the quilts she had pieced the year of their marriage.

Decker was staring up at her, his whole soul in his sunken eyes.

"You've come back, you've come back," he whispered over and over.

"Yes, I've come back," she said unsteadily.

Joy stole across from where Linda had left her, and snuggled close to her mother, whimpering a little in fright. Linda put her arm round her and lifted her up so Decker could see.

"It's your little baby, Mr. Decker," she said brokenly. "I've brought your little baby home to you."

The man stared and stared at the child, with wide, astonished eyes. At last he put out one shaking hand and just touched the chubby wrist.

"My little baby," he said slowly, "my little baby — and I never knowed."

Again the tears rushed into Linda's eyes.

He stared a little longer at the child, who, cuddled back in Linda's arms, returned his look with round, half-frightened eyes, but in the end his gaze went once more to Linda's face.

"That was a lie that woman told you — yer the only wife I got! I never knowed that was the reason you went away."

"You did n't know I thought all along she was your real wife!" Linda cried.

"No. I thought you went erway because you seed that boy was my son, an' — I — supposed you just could n't forgive me, an' I thought ef that was the way you felt I'd jist have ter let you go."

"And that was the reason you never wrote to me — never tried to find me?"

"I knowed all along where you was. I heard some rich folks had taken you, an' I knowed they could do er heap more for you than ever I could, an' I jist 'lowed er rough hand like me had better stand back, but I never knowed you did n't think you was my wife."

"And — and how did you find it out?" she faltered.

"Why, that feller, when he come up in here makin' inquiries — he told me."

"That feller — *What* feller?" she breathed.

"Why that feller from Boston — that Dr. Greenough."

"Dr. *Greenough!* Paul Greenough — *here!*" she cried, leaping up.

"He was here a couple of days ago — he's went away now, but he left that there little note on the mantel-shelf there, fer you in case you come."

With unseeing eyes Linda groped blindly along the shelf, and finding the note crossed over to the open door to read it.

"Oh, my dearest, he has written you the

truth. I came down from Washington to make inquiries. I was afraid there might be some terrible mistake. I have not been able to write to you since.—Oh, my darling! here I cannot help you, you must make this decision all alone—God help you, my little love! God help us both!"

For a long time Linda stood in the doorway staring out over the mountains, and trying to check the trembling of her whole body. At length she gained control of herself, and turning away she passed into the inner room to take off her hat. There she found everything just as she had left it. There was even an old pink calico dress of hers hanging limply from a peg in the wall. She hesitated a moment and then, taking the dress down, slipped into it, and rearranged her hair low on her neck, as she had been used to wearing it. Then, stepping back into the outer room, she began going quietly about her old familiar duties, and it was almost as though she had never been away, save that Joy 's little, busy, curious person trotted persistently after her.

Decker lay very still without speaking, but

his eyes followed her figure everywhere with a great content. Once when she came near him to straighten his pillows, and give him a cup of milk, he reached out his hand and caught her's feebly.

"Is it you, sho' 'nough?" he questioned, staring up at her half dazed.

"Yes — yes, it's me sure 'nough," she answered.

"I wonder why you come back," he said at length, speaking as much to himself as to her. She did not answer, but she continued to stand there, her hand in his.

"Honey," he whispered, putting the question direct, "why did you come back?"

She hesitated a moment, looking softly down at him with compassionate, honest eyes.

"I thought it was right to come back to you because you were sick, and because you had n't ever seen your baby — and I wanted to do what was right because — because I love some one that's a heap bigger and better than I am. I don't know whether I can just say how it is," she hesitated, "but when you're in love — real love — why, someway you sort of want to

make yourself all over, to make yourself as perfect as you can so's your heart'll be a perfect place for that love."

He was silent a little while.

"An' so," he said at length, "you come back to me because you loved that other feller. Love's a mighty strange thing," he mused presently, "an' I reckon that's true erbout its makin' you all over. Honey," he said, "I want you to know I love you — I'm just er ignorant, rough hand, an' you know I ain't allers lived straight, but after I fust seen you it was all diff'runt; it's just like you said, it kind of made me all over. I reckon, honey, I must love you sorter the way you love that other feller."

There followed a little silence, and then he spoke wistfully, his heavy hand tightening its grip a little.

"You never really loved me, did you, little honey?"

The tears leaped into Linda's eyes.

"Did you?" he persisted.

And at last she shook her head, her lips quivering.

"No, God forgive me! I reckon I never really

did," she whispered honestly. "But," she added in distress, — "but I always did kind of like you."

He smiled at the little old familiar phrase, a smile that flickered over his gaunt gray face, sadly, whimsically.

"But kind er likin' ain't what you and me know love is, is it, little honey?" he said.

"No it ain't — it ain't!" she confessed brokenly, and again she hid her face in the pillows and wept.

"Don't cry — don't cry, poor little honey," he said as before, distressed by her grief, his hands going awkwardly again to her hair. "Why, it really ain't anything to cry about. You was allers just a little white flower, an' I reckon I allers knowed I could n't never hope to have you keer fer me. I reckon all er rough hand like me had orter expect was the — what you might call — the gift of lovin' you. That kind of love sort of stretches a man's whole soul." His hand still went on tenderly stroking her hair. "An' you know you never was anything but honest," he said; "don't you recollect you said I would n't be gettin' what was really you?"

"Yes, I recollect," she whispered.

"An' we did n't either of us know just what you meant then."

"No — not then," she answered.

"An' I got er right smart little bit er money laid up fer you, honey," he went on presently, still seeking wistfully to comfort her. "An' I've bought this place, an' it'll be yours, too. I been tryin' ter save ever since you left, an' now I got jist four hundred and forty-seven dollars laid up. It orter been more, I know, but someway I ain't been very stout, an' there was ther doctor's bills, an' er heap er days I had ter lay off. I wanted mighty bad to make it a even four hundred an' fifty 'fore I quit — but I could n't make it; I tried to hold out — but . . . I jist could n't make it. You'll jist have ter excuse them last three dollars, I reckon, honey," he murmured, his voice trailing feebly away.

Linda's hand tightened upon his, but she could not speak. Again there was a long silence. His hand slipped from her head, and he lay very still. Linda rose softly at last, and resumed her evening chores. She did them all

with a certain delicate precision and finish, almost as though she were performing some sacred rite. She knew that there were not many days left in which she might minister to him.

As she moved about, she discovered that everything was just as she had left it when she walked out of the house that May morning three years before. When she turned instinctively to find some utensil it was always in its remembered place, or if it were missing Decker's voice apologized humbly.

"I'm mighty sorry, honey, but that yeller bowl yer lookin' fer is broke; it slipped out er my hand one day when I was washin' it." Or, "You have ter mind erbout that glass pitcher; it's got er terrible big crack in it. I'm feared I've been mighty keerless with some of your things."

"Never mind — never mind!" Linda cried quickly; "I never did like that yellow crock, an' this old pitcher was always gettin' itself lost just when I needed it most."

They both laughed at that, a laugh that for Linda was just on the surface below which was a passionate ache of tears, but below the

tears again was a miraculous understanding peace.

At last, when the supper dishes were washed and put away, and she had made everything ready for the night, she gathered Joy, who was asleep now, in her arms, and went over to stand in the doorway and watch the soft spring twilight fade tenderly into the velvet dark of night. Her child lay against her breast, and the mountains stretched before her under the evening sky in an infinite, still restfulness. The familiar sounds of the frogs and crickets, and the occasional half-whispered pipe of a sleepy bird hardly broke the silence, and standing there resting easily against the door-frame, Linda's whole being seemed to be shifting into deeper and stronger depths of personality.

"I'd be mighty glad if you'd come an' sit by me a spell, honey," Decker's voice spoke wistfully out of the dusk.

Linda moved from the door and, placing a low chair by his bed, sat down and took his hand in hers.

"I ain't never asked you to forgive me," he said presently.

"And I have n't asked you to forgive me for not believing you, and for running away," she answered.

"Well," he said contentedly, "I reckon we need n't to bother erbout forgiveness, seein' we both understand."

CHAPTER XXVIII

In the few days which followed, Linda went about her household duties with an extraordinary deep serenity. In the familiar tasks she seemed to be finding her old self again. Her inspiration had always lain in service, and now, in looking after her child and in nursing her husband, she found again her old strength and simplicity.

Different neighbors came to see her, and to offer help, perhaps as much in curiosity over this returned Linda as in neighborliness. But Linda refused them all, feeling an utter confidence in her own quiet ability.

Her father, she learned, had married again, a woman this time whose temper matched his own. Lily had also married, and moved into another county, taking Benny with her. Edgar, Linda's other brother, was off in one of the log camps, and the little sister Lidy had died of "the fever," the summer after Linda went away. Her father did not come to see her, nor did his wife, and

though she was again on Freedom Ridge, Linda felt singularly detached from all her old family ties, except that her heart always turned wistfully to the thought of Benny.

Decker grew steadily worse. The doctor who came up from Linden gave no hope of his recovery. He did not suffer much, but lay very quiet, for the most part, saying nothing, but with his eyes following Linda all about the room. He liked occasionally to have Joy placed on the bed beside him, when he would look and look at her little vivid face with a curious, slow wonder.

"Little Lindy," he always called her, though Linda had told him what her real name was, and it had seemed to please him at the time.

Once, after he had lain silent a long time, he called Linda over to him.

"Lindy," he said; "Lindy I've been studyin' er heap erbout things, an' I feel mighty bad that I ever let 'em make you marry me."

"But you did n't," she said quickly. "You said, don't you recollect, that I did n't *have* to marry you."

"Yes," he answered slowly, "but I know now,

I orter er been strong 'nough not to er let you do it. I was so much older 'an you, little honey, I orter er thought what was best for you, but I reckon all I thought of then was what I wanted myself. I was n't educated up to it in them days, but, honey, when you git close on the edge er ther next world you ketch er sort er glimpse er the part er love that's eternal — an' it ain't allers ther havin' part that 's everlastin', sometimes — it's ther givin' up part. An' — I'd like you to know — even ef I was ter live — I would n't want you ter feel like you was bound ter me. There now," he added quickly, seeing the tears in her eyes, "there — I won't say anything more erbout it. Go on an' finish yer dishes, little mistis, an' sing somethin'."

Linda went obediently back to her work, but it was some time before she could steady her voice sufficiently to sing.

Decker liked to have her sing, and she sat often beside him, the peace of the little room and the wide, tranquil stillness of out of doors broken only by her sweet, clear voice.

"I reckon when er feller comes ter die," he said once, "there could n't be er easier way er

steppin' ercrost than with you settin' there in ther dusk singin' —"

'There's er land that is fairer than day.'"

Toward the end his mind wandered a good deal, and at those times the intervening years were obliterated, the clock of his memory appearing to have stopped just before that day when the woman had come and Linda had run away. Joy became Benny in his delirium, and he rambled on to Linda about his old work at the sawmill.

"We're cuttin' now in ther Piney Holler," he said once, and Linda remembered with a pang that there was where he had been at work just the day before she left.

Once in a lucid moment he asked about the flowers he had planted for her, and she went out and gathered all the gay little blooms, and placed them in a glass where he could see them. He lay and looked at them, murmuring, "Little white flower — yer jest like one er these here little white spring flowers." And Linda knew that he had confused her in his mind with the blossoms.

She was glad that they should have had those

few days undisturbed together before the very last, when all the neighbors came to sit with her, as is the habit on Freedom Ridge, and filled the little cabin to overflowing with a sombre, waiting crowd. But it had not mattered then, for Decker was unconscious, and they had had their few days together of perfect understanding peace and forgiveness.

With his hands folded across Linda's white flowers, they buried Armstrong Decker in the tiny graveyard tucked away in the woods on Freedom Ridge. Sarah Speedwell spent the following night with Linda, "Jest ter keep it from seemin' so lonesome," she said kindly, but she had to leave early in the morning to get her husband's breakfast, and Linda was glad, for there was much that she had to do, and she desired to do it alone.

As soon as Sarah had gone, Linda set to work. With feverish energy, she began going steadily and swiftly about the little house, sweeping, dusting, scrubbing — making all spotlessly, beautifully clean. She washed the floors and windows, set all the shining utensils in their accustomed places, pulled the cheap little cur-

tains at the windows exactly even, dusted everywhere, and placed all the chairs and tables in their most homelike and inviting positions. And at last, when everything in both the little rooms was in its most perfect, most exquisite order, when it was all finished, and all immaculately clean, with her deft, swift touches she had given to the little dwelling, in its absolute cleanliness and simplicity, a delicate grace and charm of its own. It was as though some great event awaited, and for it she desired the place to be its most perfect self. When all was set to rights, she brought in from the near-by woods a great armful of wild azalea, sprays of the fragrant pink variety, and others of all the shades of yellow. These she put all about the house, a flaming mass of color in the fireplace, and other bunches on the plain little tables, and on the mantel-shelf. There was a faded photograph of herself which Decker had insisted on her having taken on their wedding-day. In it she was clad in the pathetic wedding-dress which her mother had furnished for the occasion, but neither it nor the uncompromising flatness of the cheap photographer's art had been able entirely to

obliterate the slender, dark charm of her sixteen years. Linda pulled the picture to the front of the shelf, and decked it now with a spray of yellow azaleas.

"For you was the mistress of the house, an' he thought a heap of you," she told her child self, speaking almost as to a stranger.

At last it was all done, everything was clean, everything in order, and every table and shelf decked with flowers. It seemed almost like a shrine—a perfect setting for some deep, and simple, and universal emotion. The doors and windows were open so that the sunlight poured in, and the faint summer breeze blew through the rooms laden with their clean fragrance, and with the delicate perfume of the flowers. Graced with its sunlight and flowers, the place seemed almost to smile and to take on an illusive personality of its own.

Linda still went softly about, touching a flower here, pushing a bit of china to place there with caressing hands, and murmuring little half-inaudible words of affection, as though the things were alive and sensitive to her touch. Then gathering Joy in her arms she sat down

in a low chair, and sent her thoughts back over the past. And as she reviewed all her life there, it seemed to her that not only were the familiar furnishings of the house present, but all the spirit of the place as well. As though every affectionate word Armstrong Decker had ever spoken to her, every considerate thought he had had for her, were alive now, and present in the little house, as though all the thoughts, and words, and actions that made up the mosaic of the man's love for her had here sprung into life and were enshrined.

With a deep-caught breath she rose at last with Joy on her arm, and turning her back resolutely on the still little room, with its look of waiting and of dedication, she went swiftly out of doors, and there, with a set face and with hands that shook, began gathering up all the chips and dry kindling she could find, and heaping them in great piles against the sides and back and front of the house. These she deluged with kerosene, and when all was ready struck the first match. With it in her fingers she paused an instant, turning her face up to the deep, still sky. "It was yours — all yours, Mr. Decker," she

whispered. "An' I'm sendin' it all to you!" and with the words, she stuck the match deep among the oil-soaked sticks. The flames caught quickly, and snatching a blazing stick she ran with it here and there setting it to pile after pile, until in a moment the house was blazing on every side, the red tongues of fire roaring among the oil-soaked chips, and beginning to leap up the sun-dried sides of the building. And crying over and over, "It 's yours — all yours, Mr. Decker!" Linda snatched Joy up out of danger, and stood back among the maple trees and watched the waving red banners of flame. And as the fire roared and crackled, and the sparks flew skyward, and the wind swept the columns of smoke here and there, Linda cried wildly to Joy, "See daddy's house — daddy's little house that he loved — going up to him, all going to him!"

Just as the roof fell in with a crash and roar, swirling the sparks high, and the flames wrapped the whole in a blinding, crimson sheet, Linda heard running steps behind her, and turning, saw Paul Greenough through the shreds of flying smoke.

"What is it — what are you doing, Linda?" he shouted.

"He's dead!" she cried wildly to him. "Mr. Decker is dead!"

"I know! I asked the doctor at Linden to telegraph to me—"

Linda flung out her hand toward the flaming house. "It's his!" she cried, — "all his, and I wanted him to have it!"

"What do you mean — what have you done?" he panted, and put his arm about her.

"Oh, Paul, Paul!" she cried, leaning against him, the tears running down her cheeks, "oh, maybe you'll think I'm awful foolish, but it was his an' I wanted him to have it — his little house where he learned such a heap about love! An' someway, I could n't ever have anybody else live in it — I wanted to send it all after him! It seemed like to me, when I came back, and found every single thing just like I'd left it, an' knew he'd kept it like that through all the years, it seemed like a little dedicated place — a place that was dedicated to love an' — an'" — she was sobbing now — "an' I thought if I burnt it all up that that would

sort of translate it and make it immortal, so's — so's it could go to him, because — because" — she said brokenly, hiding her face against Paul's shoulder, and clinging to him — "though I reckon he was a mighty rough hand, he certainly did know a heap about love."

Paul drew her and Joy close into his arms, and, stooping, kissed her. "I know he did," he whispered.

THE END

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